SOME ASPECTS OF THE NATURE AND CONTENT OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY, WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF CHILDHOOD

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PART I

Discussion of some critics' definitions and views of autobiography is followed by examination of the nature of its truth and selectivity. Attention is given to the roles of memory, motivation and intention and the part played by the unconscious. Part I concludes with some critical and authorial suggestions for sub-dividing the very large genre of autobiography to facilitate study, noting the difficulties this presents. There is also discussion of the ways in which the autobiographer's choice of form and style can enhance or limit self-revelation.

PART II

The special features of the autobiography of childhood as a sub-division of the genre are discussed, with further examination of the complexities of memory, motivation and intention in relation to the difficulties of interpreting and presenting the child protagonist.

The significance and presentation of memories and researched material at all stages of childhood is examined in conjunction with the psychological needs of the autobiographer and the formal requirements of literature. The universal nature of the areas of childhood commonly recalled is noted, but the subjective individual use and presentation of the material is stressed.

The work is illustrated throughout by extracts from appropriate texts. The autobiographical extracts are drawn from approximately forty-five texts by a variety of authors, some of established literary repute and others of a more popular nature. This indicates a departure from many other studies of autobiography, which tend to concentrate on material by renowned literary figures, and suggests an area for wider study of the genre. Reference has also been made to a number of critical texts and relevant radio programmes.

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PREFACE

My interest in the study of autobiography began on reading John Burnett's books Useful Toil (1974) and Destiny Obscure (1982). Much of his material is ephemeral, unpublished fragments of autobiography, yet it provides valuable sources for social history. Without researchers such as Professor Burnett, this material would have been lost or remained hidden in archives or attics. A great deal of twentieth century published autobiography is likely to prove as ephemeral as Professor Burnett's material - that written by passing figures of the age such as politicians, performers, popular authors and ordinary people who would otherwise be unknown to the general public. A study of literary history indicates that such ephemeral literature contributes not only to the ethos of its own times, but also to the wider study of a particular literary genre. By its comparative straightforwardness it may, in fact, highlight certain techniques or structures which can then be used in the examination of more consciously artistic or complex examples.

There has been a huge output of published autobiography in recent years; I wondered what prompted people to expose their lives to public scrutiny, and what they thought memorable and worth recording. Many autobiographers go deeply into childhood memories - some concentrate exclusively on this period. It is apparent from the research of Professor Burnett and others that this is not a twentieth century phenomenon, though the age is interested in anything to do with childhood. This raised the question of why autobiographers feel the need to return to their earliest years: is it in order to trace how the child was "father to the man", or does remembering and recreating childhood have any other functions for the individual? Further reading suggested that autobiographies of childhood had certain factors in common which merited closer examination, and the sub-group provided a suitably limited area for study.

Professional critics of the genre usually draw their examples from autobiographies of established literary repute - those of celebrated novelists, poets, philosophers, etc. In an attempt to achieve a balance I have chosen a variety of texts for study, some well-known and highly regarded, and others which might be considered "popular" or ephemeral, but which seem to illustrate my findings about autobiography equally well.

INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS AUTOBIOGRAPHY?

The Shorter Oxford Dictionary defines autobiography as "The writing of one's own history; the story of one's life written by himself". (1) One would think that there could be little disagreement with this basic definition, but critics are anxious to elaborate on it and offer their own definitions. One of the few English critics of the genre, Roy Pascal, says that autobiography:

> . . . involves the reconstruction of the movement of a life, or part of it . . . Its centre of interest is the self, not the outside world, though necessarily the outside world must appear, so that, in give and take with it, the personality finds its peculiar shape . . . imposes a pattern on a life, constructs out of it a coherent story. It establishes certain stages in an individual's life, makes links between them . . . in every case it is his present position which enables him to see his life as something of a unity, something that may be reduced to order. (2)

This suggests that autobiography is more complex than just writing the story of one's own life. Life's events do not in themselves necessarily offer a coherent story, nor are links readily established between its stages. The words that Pascal uses, "reconstruction", "shape", "pattern", "imposes", "establishes", "constructs", "reduced", imply that the autobiographer is not <u>following</u> events, but fashioning them to suit the needs of his autobiography. If life is to be "reduced to order" some process of selection and arrangement must be involved or the work would be tedious reminiscence rather than a work of literature.

Wayne Shumaker gives some indication of the process involved in reviewing and shaping a life for the purposes of autobiography when he compares it with "the stepping back of a painter to have a look at the finished canvas". (3) Like the painter, the autobiographer cannot include the whole scene, so he must step back and half close his eyes to blur some of the incidental detail of the panorama before him; thus the completed painting or autobiography will be a selective representation of the original subject. However, unlike the painter with his picture, the autobiographer cannot regard his autobiography as a "finished canvas". His life will go on, he cannot know the full circumstances of his own death and must leave his biographer to complete the picture. Yet even in its unfinished

state his life is still a huge canvas. Compare it with one of Frith's larger paintings: the whole represents a mass of colour and movement with a general theme which is readily understood - a railway station or a racecourse, for example. Each group and individual is exquisitely portrayed and contributes to the picture, but none is more important than the whole. Autobiography is essentially, by its very composition as a word - self-life-writing - concerned with the self. A writer who depicted his life in terms of one of Frith's panoramas, with no clear separation from the life around him, would be more correctly described as writing a memoir, or a fragment of social history, where the focus is outward, not inward. If he is not to lose sight of this self in the mass of everyday events, the autobiographer must carefully select those which enhance his self-discovery and omit those which do not.

The comparison of autobiography with the visual medium of painting is also used by William L. Howarth, who asserts that it is a literary version of the self-portrait. (4) The two are not entirely analogous. The painted self-portrait is more comparable with a diary entry, which reflects the state of the writer at the time of making it rather than offering the retrospective view of autobiography. The series of self-portraits by Rembrandt and Van Gogh, showing the development of the artists over a number of years, offer a better analogy, but are still "fixed" at the time of their creation. The autobiographer is at liberty to change the balance of events from his retrospective and selective viewpoint; whatever "face" he sees on looking back will take on its shape, texture and colour from his remembered view and be re-created by his imagination now.

Georges Gusdorf compares autobiography with the visual medium of the film, saying:

> While a painting is a representation of the present, autobiography claims to retrace a period, a development in time, not by juxtaposing instantaneous images but by composing a kind of film according to a pre-established scenario. (5)

This is an interesting comparison, but unlike most of the film-maker's subjects, the "camera" has been on the autobiographer for the whole of his life. Yet he cannot use the whole "film", only

parts of it. The technique used by the film-maker for some natural history documentaries is nearest to that used by the autobiographer. The camera will be on the egg, larvae, seed or other chosen subject for the whole time of the study, but development is very slow and barely perceptible from moment to moment. To make the process of development visible and understandable the film-maker speeds up his film, telescoping into minutes or seconds the various stages that may have taken days or weeks. Similarly, the autobiographer will speed up and telescope some stages of his life whilst pausing to dwell on others which he considers more important, writing his own continuity to join them together.

James Olney feels that autobiography is "like a magnifying lens". (6) By its very nature a magnifying lens will bring small areas into better focus whilst making the surrounding areas look blurred. If it is held too close to a subject the proportions will appear monstrously distorted, bearing little relation to what is normally seen by the naked eye. To the autobiographer the events of his past life will have very much this kind of distortion: some will appear "larger than life", taking on a significance which they may not have had initially, whilst others will blur almost beyond recognition.

These attempts to define autobiography by means of straightforward statement or analogy are easy to understand and apply. Other critics offer more complex definitions. These are often influenced by their particular spheres of interest, which are not always primarily literary. James Olney describes his own interest in autobiography as:

> . . . on the one hand psychological-philosophical, on the other hand moral . . . focused in one direction on the relation traceable between lived experience and its written record and in the other direction on what that written record offers to us as readers and as human beings. (7)

Thus he approaches definition from <u>two</u> standpoints rather than the <u>one</u> which might be taken by a critic who regarded autobiography solely as a work of literature. Olney sees autobiography as "a metaphor of the self", maintaining that there is no meaning-pattern in things themselves, but only in the connections supplied by both writer and reader. (8) This implies that the autobiographer is

searching for a meaning-pattern (consciously or unconsciously) in the metaphor he creates and not choosing memories solely to make a tidy-looking autobiography. Some deeper meaning is sought that will explain his life by way of the metaphor that he makes for it.

Peter Abbs approaches a similar metaphysical definition when he says that "autobiography is engaged with ontological questions, with true and false modes of being in the world". (9) Presumably Abbs does not mean that it is the autobiographer's business to examine the nature of the universe, but rather his own place in it. This is an attempt to find the self, the meaning-pattern, and an answer to the questions posed by all autobiographers, "Who am I?", "Where do I come from?", "Where do I fit in?"

The definition and study of autobiography is now complicated by "approach", as critics attempt to analyse it from the standpoint of the philosopher, psychologist, metaphysicist, structuralist, Marxist and so on. The American critic Albert Stone sees it as "a naturally multi-disciplinary subject":

> . . . most of the compartments of public and private experience which in Western cultures have been organised into the social sciences and humanities are relevant to autobiography . . . No single disciplinary perspective, I would argue, embraces or explains so protean an activity of self-construction. (10)

This approach is entirely suitable for the study of autobiography, as life itself is "multi-disciplinary". The autobiographer will construct his meaning-patterns from all the cultural influences of the society in which he has lived, and lives when he writes his autobiography. His experiences of these will have conditioned his psychological make-up; his psychological make-up will, in turn, condition the type of autobiography that he writes and the kind of material that he selects for it. The sophisticated autobiographer may write with the awareness that his autobiography is likely to be destructured or restructured by a variety of disciplines; he may choose his style, form and material with due regard to his own disciplinary approach. But many, even most, autobiographers will regard the exercise as "writing my life story", relating more to the simple definition with which this chapter began. Basically, autobiography is concerned with one person's life experience, written by that person. Life is infinitely complex and some process of

selection will be used in the interests of coherence. Memory may be imperfect, so there will be some distortion. Motives will be mixed and this will create further distortion. Because no-one exists in a vacuum there will be some picture of the writer's social and cultural setting. All lives are inter-twined with those of other people, so there will be something of those closest to the autobiographer. The setting of autobiography is in the past, but the present self is the guiding hand; this present self will be there all the time, analysing, selecting and directing. He will be following what Gusdorf describes as "this path that goes around my life and leads me the more surely from me to myself". (11) The ways in which the autobiographer remembers, selects and describes what he sees on this path and the obstacles he meets on the way will be the subject of investigation for this thesis.

Where both sexes are referred to in the text the more conventional masculine pronoun has been used to indicate he/she, etc.

INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS AUTOBIOGRAPHY?

1 The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 3rd ed.
2 Roy Pascal, Design and Truth in Autobiography, p.9
3 Wayne Shumaker, English Autobiography, p.103
4 William L. Howarth, "Some Principles of Autobiography", in Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical, ed. James Olney, p.85
5 Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography", in Olney, op.cit., p.35
6 James Olney, Metaphors of Self, p.3
7 Ibid, Preface, x
8 Ibid, p.30
9 Peter Abbs, "Autobiography", in New Pelican Guide to English Literature, ed. Peter Abbs, p.511
10 Albert E. Stone, Introduction to The American Autobiography, ed. Albert E. Stone, p.2
11 Georges Gusdorf, op.cit., p.38

PART I

TRUTH AND SELECTIVITY

CHAPTER ONE

THE ROLE OF MEMORY IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Any attempt at autobiography involves the present self in the exercise of thinking and writing about the past self. As subject and author are the same, one might think that the problems presented were merely those of the limitations of memory and what to put in or leave out to make a coherent whole. Yet although the past and present selves have inhabited the same body, are they, in fact, "the same" - a united self? Can the present self truly recognise and interpret the self of the past? The woman of twenty-five is not "the same" as the little girl of five, nor the man of seventy "the same" as he was as a boy of seven. The one has, somehow, grown from the other by a slow process of learning and changing. Memory and its store, which must be used to recall and rescue the past from time's flux and to re-create and fix it in literature, will itself have been re-examined at each stage of the growth of the self. In turn, each stage of development will have been conditioned by that which preceded it, resulting eventually in the self who is writing the story. It is only possible to contact the selves of the past - for there must be many - by an effort of will and the exercise of memory, trying to recall what happened as honestly as possible, yet seeing through the eyes of the present self. Georges Gusdorf comments:

> The past that is recalled has lost its flesh and bone solidity, but it has won a new and more intimate relationship to the individual life that can thus, after being long dispersed and sought again throughout the course of time, be rediscovered and drawn together again beyond time. (1)

How can an autobiographer be sure that he is telling the truth about himself in this process of rediscovery, rather than unwittingly playing a sort of Chinese whispers' game, where a phrase whispered at the beginning of the circle of players often becomes totally corrupted as it is passed on, subect as it is to the physical processes of speech and hearing and also to the individual's built-in prejudices of expectation and interpretation? It is a universal experience to come suddenly face to face with a total stranger, possibly of slightly eccentric appearance, only to realise that it is one's own image reflected in a shop mirror. If it is so difficult

to recognise the present self, then how much more difficult must it be to recognise and relate to a past self. We are all familiar with the photographs of ourselves taken in babyhood, round-faced little creatures with startled, wide eyes, perched precariously on a high seat in a photographer's studio, or kicking unconcernedly on a furry rug. Told by our elders, "This is you when you were one year old", we accept the truth of this statement but, unless memory is exceptional (and some autobiographers do claim to remember sitting in pram or cot) we feel no link with this distant self. We may try to interpret what we see - that infant scowl and apparent refusal to smile on demand may be taken as an early sign of what we now see as our lifelong determination not to conform, though in fact it may have been due to tiredness or short sight. Later photographs will have more impact - we will remember the occasions on which they were taken, recognise the people and places involved, and perhaps also something of how we ourselves felt at the time (or think <u>now</u> that we felt <u>then</u>) but the impression is still of another self, one which <u>was</u>, but exists no longer. One of the autobiographer's problems is to communicate with his past selves in order to trace the patterns and connections in his life that have made up his present self, and to establish the "intimate relationship" that Gusdorf mentions.

The autobiographer may draw not only upon his own memories but, if he wishes to make a reasonably wide picture of his life, upon those of others. This may be especially useful for the very early period of his life, or for those times which, although he has his own clear memories of them, seem inexplicable in terms of cause and effect because he was not in a position to understand what was going on around him. Gusdorf says:

> In the immediate moment, the agitation of things ordinarily surrounds me too much for me to be able to see it [experience] in its entirety. Memory gives me a certain remove and allows me to take into consideration all the ins and outs of the matter, its context in time and space. (2)

This acknowledges the difficulty of recognising the relative importance of events at the time they happen, but it does not indicate either the capriciousness of memory or the subjectiveness with which the present self is likely to view the events of the past.

Many, indeed most, autobiographies appear to the reader to be a sequence of fluently remembered pictures of past life; we are not usually aware, unless he chooses to tell us, how the autobiographer has got in touch with his past selves and set the process of memory in action. It is unlikely that any autobiographer sits down at his desk, remembers and notes the incidents of his life in chronological order, then sets them out as a continuous narrative. Memory takes strange leaps, so that what is apparently forgotten at one stage of life may be remembered and considered at another, prompted by some unexpected stimulus; something that has not been thought about for years comes rushing into consciousness and another signpost on the map of the past may be seen.

One modern autobiographer who makes the processes of examining old memories and seeking stimulus for new ones visible to the reader in the very structure of his autobiography is Ronald Fraser. As a professional writer and oral historian, he used the techniques of oral history to aid his search for the past. He returned with his tape recorder to the home he left when he was ten years old to search out old servants who knew him and his family. His memories of the time were hurtful and confused; there was much that he did not understand. In returning to the scenes of his boyhood after twenty-five years he hoped that he would be able to understand and dispose of the past. He glimpsed the manor house clearly from a distance, but as he approached his feelings of its inaccesibility, together with the past that it represented, began to return:

> . . . with each turn of the approaching road the view began to lose clarity. The closer I got the further the house receded behind walls, out-buildings, tall trees until, driving past, there was only a fleeting glimpse of white walls beyond the stable yard. . . The place remained impenetrable, enclosed by walls of every sort. And that's how it has always been. (3)

The external view of the manor led him to remember its internal features:

> . . . the old at the rear, a place of small, pleasant rooms with bulging beams and walls thick enough to withstand a seige where servants, nanny and children lived; and the superimposed and imposing new Manor at the front, which belonged to the parents. (4)

His imagination then set the people of the house in their typical roles:

> . . . the immediate foreground was shared by Ilse, forever starchily uniformed and loving, to whom I was attached by immemorial bonds; and Bert, who was eternally digging the garden and pulling funny faces from beneath his cocked trilby to make me laugh . . . More distantly, as though in another world, I can see my mother, Janey, in top hat and veil, mounted side-saddle on her dappled grey mare, and the back of my father's red coat as they left for the hunt. (5)

The walls of the first quotation are used in the autobiography as a metaphor for Fraser's feelings of frustration in trying to approach his past. The divisions of the household, especially those between parents and children, are exemplified in the second and third passages. By returning in such a direct way to his past, Fraser hoped to be able to bridge the divisions and penetrate the "walls"; instead he found himself in a paradoxical world in which, he says, "everything was familiar yet there was no memory of it" (6) and ultimately on a psychiatrist's couch. Even the walls which are so significant to him may not exist in the memories of others; Ilse, his former nanny, says: "Walls, Ronnie? Oh no, it was a nice open place. A large garden with lawns, trees and shrubs". (7)

As his research proceeds he finds many other contradictions as events and people are reinterpreted from different viewpoints. Descriptions of his father are so contradictory that one might think that people were not talking about the same man:

> Bert, the gardener: He was very abrupt, the governor, you know, very sarcastic. I mean, we were no more than a heap of dirt in his eyes. Lord of the Manor, he was. He'd walk by us in the garden and never speak. Sooner have died than go near a cabbage. Many's the morning he's come out of the front door and I've been wheeling a barrow of coke across the yard to the stoke-hole and he'd just glare at me. (8)
>
> Mrs. Carvell, wife of the groom: . . . your father was a very nice gentleman who always made you feel at ease. He could talk to anyone and wasn't stand-offish. A very charming, courteous man. (9)
>
> Carvell, the groom: I didn't like him as much as your mother, especially because of the way he treated his horses. He was too severe, he lost his temper with them . . . (10)

The repeated discrepancies which Fraser finds between his own memories of past events and those of others indicate one of the greatest difficulties that the autobiographer and his readers have to face - the subjectiveness of memory which makes truth so elusive. Fraser's

autobiography might have been very different if he had looked only into his own memories instead of searching for the disparate elements of his life story through those of others. Having many views of "what happened" does not necessarily take an autobiographer any nearer to finding out the actual, historical truth of past events; many facts about the past are verifiable - births, deaths, marriages, starting school, being ill, etc., but these are only a framework of life on which is built an endless pattern of emotion and experience, with almost every action affecting and affected by those around us. The memories of the people Fraser speaks to are themselves subjective, conditioned by their own lives, the changes that have taken place in the intervening years and their present position. Bert speaks as a man who still resents the class structure of a quarter of a century ago which made him feel like a second-class citizen. Also colouring his response is his possible desire, which Fraser recognises only too well, to "string him along" and, one suspects, to settle old scores against Fraser senior.

Fraser's examination of his past did not, as Gusdorf optimistically suggests (11), give him a comfortable distancing from the past, allowing him to put it into order and context. The more he discovered, the more confused he became, doubting the validity of his own memories when he compared them with those of others. He only began to make sense of the past when he realised that it was a collective experience made up of the memories of many different people, with no one version representing the truth. Equally important is his ultimate realisation, aided by his analyst, that the past cannot be put tidily away but, with all its confusions, is part of the present.

Fraser's difficulties in researching and writing his autobiography are grounded in his text, but this is unusual; normally we do not know if the autobiographer's information about his early life, half-forgotten, was obtained by personal recall, by visiting the places of the past, by tapping or taping other people's memories; nor do we know the agonies the process may have involved, or why some things have been recorded and not others. Virginia Woolf says that she separates life's events into what she calls "non-being" (the humdrum, repetitive, routine features of everyday life) and "being" (the events that excite the imagination). She suggests that the latter,

the "moments of being", are those which we are most likely to remember. (12) Whilst this is often the case - and the moments of being may be the more interesting to write and read about - it would be wrong to conclude that they and other overtly important or impressive happenings are the only things remembered from the past. The importance of apparently trivial memories will be discussed in later chapters. Moments of being or memorable and symbolic events will be embedded in the many moments of non-being which make up the larger proportion of the fabric of most lives, leaving between them enormous, misty gaps which are completely unaccounted for. Even the moments of being may not be quite as memory reproduces them; what seems like a memory of a particular incident may, in fact, be a composite memory, where features of several similar incidents coalesce. Rosemary Sutcliff recognises this, admitting that on one occasion what she <u>thinks</u> she remembers is probably a blend of many idyllic summer afternoons spent, as a small child, sitting in the grass and looking at the plants and insects. Of another occasion she says:

> My memory says that the woods around were all pine trees, but there must be a mistake somewhere, because I also have a picture of finding acorns among fallen leaves and dark friable leaf-mould. (13)

Laurie Lee admits to the deliberate construction of composite memories as part of his ordering and selection, saying:

> In another chapter, about our life at home, I describe a day that never happened. Perhaps a thousand days of that life each yielded a moment for the book - a posture, a movement, a tone - all singly true and belonging to each other, though never having been joined before. (14)

The historian Wilhelm Dilthey shows his awareness of the autobiographer's difficulties in equating the demands of factual truth with the fallibility of memory and creating a work of literature when he comments:

> He /the autobiographer/ has, in his memory, singled out and accentuated the moments which he experienced as significant; others he has allowed to sink into forgetfulness. The future has corrected his illusions about the significance of certain moments . . . Between the parts we see a connection which neither is, nor is intended to be, the simple likeness of the course of a life of so many years, but which because understanding is involved, expresses what the individual knows about the continuity of his life. (15)

Any intelligent autobiographer or reader will realise that autobiographical description will not necessarily show exactly what happened at a particular moment on a particular day; many memories will be factual, but others will be an attempt to portray what it felt like to be "there". Rosemary Sutcliff's recollections of moments of being as a child in a field - warm, happy and experiencing a sense of magic and discovery - is an example of Gusdorf's "new and more intimate relationship" (16) that the past acquires when it is sought and seen anew, the result of a pattern of memory which time has invested with meaning for her. In his essay on autobiography Laurie Lee sums up the nature of its truth when he points out that facts and figures do not convey the spirit of an event or a place (17) and goes on to say:

> In writing autobiography, especially one that looks back at a childhood, the only truth is what you remember. No one else who was there can agree with you because he has his own version of what he saw. He also holds to a personal truth of himself, based on an indefatigable self-regard . . . The truth is, of course, that there is no pure truth, only the moody accounts of witnesses. (18)

The essential nature of the truth of memory in autobiography is not to provide dates, times and places, but to use what memory and other sources provide with imagination and artistry as part of Pascal's "coherent story" (19), remembering and reinterpreting the past.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ROLE OF MEMORY IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

1 Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography", in Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical, ed. James Olney, p.38
2 Ibid, p.38
3 Ronald Fraser, In Search of a Past: the Manor House, Amnersfield, 1933-1945, pp.3-4
4 Ibid, pp.4-5
5 Ibid, p.5
6 Ibid, p.16
7 Ibid, p.11
8 Ibid, p.29
9 Ibid, p.61
10 Ibid, p.59
11 Gusdorf, op.cit., p.38
12 Virginia Woolf, Moments of Being, ed. Jeanne Schulkind, p.70
13 Rosemary Sutcliff, Blue Remembered Hills, p.45
14 Laurie Lee, "Writing Autobiography", in I Can't Stay Long, p.51
15 Wilhelm H. Dilthey, Selected Writings, ed. H. P. Rickman, p.86
16 Gusdorf, op.cit., p.38
17 Lee, op.cit., p.51
18 Ibid, p.52
19 Roy Pascal, Design and Truth in Autobiography, p.9

CHAPTER TWO

MOTIVATION AND INTENTION

It has become apparent that much of what can honestly be included in autobiography will be limited by the extent of the memories of the writer and others concerned. These limitations of memory are themselves a form of selection from life's many and varied events, but once the memories have been retrieved the autobiographer will be faced with the task of further editing them into some sort of shape and, for various reasons, admitting some but excluding others. Pascal mentions several factors which, in his opinion, will affect this, saying: "Humdrum details must be left out, but in some cases a quite small incident acquires autobiographical significance". There will be "scruples with regard to other persons", though he qualifies this by adding that posthumously published autobiographies are usually no more indelicate or scandalous than others. There may be "reticence about joys, perhaps because of a feeling that they are too intimate to be shared". He concludes that "we must try to discover what sort of truth is meant in relation to the author's intention". (1) This last is echoed by Darrell Mansell when he asserts:

> . . . usually autobiographers know perfectly well what they are doing: like novelists, they are selecting and altering personal experience to create a structure of words that answer to an inner vision or purpose of some kind. (2)

The psychoanalyst Charles Rycroft take the idea a little further:

> Autobiographies cannot but be selective, the selection being based partly on what has been registered and is available for recall, and partly on the autobiographer's intentions. Some self-justification, self-aggrandisement, confession and a talent to amuse will lead to different selections being made from a nearly infinite store of memories available. (3)

These quotations imply that the autobiographer understands his motives and intentions and is fully in control of his material, so that if we could only grasp these intentions we too would be able to understand both him and his story. However, the very idea of intention as a basis for critical judgement and even the author's own conception of his intention has been called into question by other critics. Wimsatt argues that "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging

the success of a work of literary art". (4) If it is not available for judging success - itself a relative concept - intention is presumably not available for any other purpose, including the understanding of meaning and truth. Terry Eagleton takes a slightly modified view, saying that even if critics could obtain access to an author's intentions, it would not necessarily give us a determinate meaning, adding:

> . . . it is difficult to know what it could be to have a 'pure' intention or express a 'pure' meaning . . . An author's intention is itself a complex 'text', which can be debated, translated and variously interpreted just like any other. (5)

The concept of intention is further complicated by Freud's studies of the unconscious. His theories on the subject of early memories will be mentioned in a later chapter, but in general he regarded consciousness as only a relatively small part of man's make-up, with all our actions partly controlled by primitive urges which influence us without our necessarily being aware of them. If this is true of life in general, it must apply even more markedly to the autobiographical process, where memories, motives, intentions and meanings are highly subjective and liable to be affected by the same unconscious factors. Far from the autobiographer knowing perfectly well what he is doing, as Mansell maintains, when he selects his memories in order to fulfil his intentions, we are led to doubt if he knows what his real intentions are. If this is so, how can we, with only the printed page in front of us in many cases, and influenced by our own subjective interpretations, ever hope to understand what the autobiographer is really trying to tell us?

There are arguments which modify the above views. It is not necessarily trueto say that the intention of the author is not available, though it may not be a "pure" intention or one that will lead us to a "pure"meaning. Statements of intention may be of considerable interest in the interpretation of a work, so that it is difficult to see how they can be regarded as undesirable. However, intentions will be subject to conscious and unconscious forces, so should not be taken at face value. This can be a bonus, for comparison of the stated intention with what the autobiographer actually says and does in his book may lead us to the discovery of deeper meanings which he unwittingly reveals.

The quotations at the beginning of this section suggest that the autobiographer is prompted to write his story by something within him, his "inner vision", which is referred to here as his motivation. He then uses his memories selectively in accordance with "a purpose of some kind" - his intention. Motivation and intention will be closely related to the results the autobiographer hopes to achieve, and in turn to what he assumes will be his reader's expectations. A reader who picks up Lord George Brown's Political Memoirs (6) could not reasonably expect to find any great emphasis on the author's private life, nor would he expect the autobiography of a famous film star to be all about politics - unless the subject was Ronald Reagan! The autobiographers have not necessarily forgotten about the events which go unrecorded, but have selected their material in accordance with what they feel is their intention.

The autobiographies with which this thesis is concerned are all published works and were either written with the hope of publication or adapted to suit that purpose. Anyone who writes with the intention of publication must pay due regard to the work as an object of consumer production and, if it is to have any chance of success, the book must be readable, entertaining or instructive. That the work should appeal to potential readers will inevitably govern the author's principles of selection. These will include the factors covered by Rycroft's "talent to amuse", which will lead the autobiographer to highlight certain incidents and leave out others - often Pascal's "humdrum details" - which might prove tedious to the reader or irrelevent to the theme and intention. Pascal's "scruples with regard to other persons", as well as the laws of libel, may be another governing factor, though many autobiographers change the names of characters in order to avoid embarrassment. These external influences on sele_ctivity are fairly obvious and apply to all or most published autobiographies, but if we wish to know what sort of "truth" the work aspires to, what the author is <u>really</u> trying to say about his life, consciously or unconsciously, we need to know more about the individual criteria of selectivity and how these are governed by the author's motivation and intention. How can we know about these unless they are stated? How can we know what prompts an autobiographer to write his story, selecting and arranging his memories in order to achieve

his intention? Some autobiographers do tell us something of why they have written about their lives and what they are trying to do, but can we trust these statements?

In the Preface to her fragment of autobiography the broadcaster Jean Metcalfe sums up her own position:

> Looking back has been like lifting the front off an old doll's house and finding that all the smells and sounds and sensations of long ago are still there waiting to be taken out and recognised. But, of course, someone who is fifty years older notices the cobwebs and shadowy corners more than the child did. Hindsight keeps reminding me that the faded photograph people living in Sunnylea's safe circle were not dolls with happy smiles forever fixed on their faces . . .
>
> Now that they are gone, time, in the end, has sharpened my edges. Even so, I have tried to draw the doll's house happenings as they seemed to me then, without cobwebs or shadows. (7)

The book's cover blurb says that Jean Metcalfe painted the watercolours with which the autobiography is illustrated for her future grandchildren, and the dedication is ". . . to Colin, who missed this part of the story". At the end of the book, dated 1930, which is also the date at which the incidents described in the book finish, we read that Colin has been born, "A brother for Jean". In this straightforward and popular fragment of autobiography we find some useful mention of the author's difficulties and also some mention of her motives and intentions. She recognises the difficulty of the present self interpreting the long-distant past, and that time has changed her perspective of past events, but determines to <u>try</u> to think herself back into that child's mind and see through the child's eyes. Her intention, apparently, is to recreate some of her early childhood in writing and painting; to look at it anew herself and to show her brother what his family circle was like before he came into it, and to show her future grandchildren what life was like for a particular child earlier in the century. She also tells them something of their older relations that goes beyond mere names and dates. It is, in effect, a very simple social history of a family. Whatever clouds and shadows hovered over England between 1923 and 1930 are not mentioned, partly because it is unlikely that a little girl of seven or under would have been aware of them, and partly because they are outside the scope of the book and not in keeping with its intentions. However, if we look more closely at this apparently "simple" little

autobiography, the author's intentions are not quite as straightforward as she thinks - or would have us believe. If, as she says, the book was written for the interest of various relatives, why did she bother to get it published at all? She could have stuck the paintings in a scrapbook and typed out the brief text to go alongside if she intended it for such a limited audience. The very fact of publication suggests an unacknowledged financial motive and the hope or need of a wider audience. The conclusion of the autobiography suggests that the author recognises feelings in the little girl of seven that are not quite in accord with her intention of painting Sunnylea "without cobwebs or shadows". She tells us that in 1930 electricity was installed in their house. Because the light was so bright it made the house look grubby, so her mother suggested "some nice new paint" in the little girl's bedroom. Jean Metcalfe says:

> Ungrateful child, all I can do is wail. How can I explain? For the first time in my life everything is changing. I go to school. Billy the cat has died. Without those dear old damp patches on my ceiling nothing will ever seem the same again. Father and Mother smile indulgently and let the shabby ceiling stay. But then, they know other changes are on the way which no amount of wheedling tears can alter. (8)

The "other changes" indicate the imminent arrival of the baby brother who, as the author says, "is about to push me from the centre of the picture". Hardly an idyllic note on which to end the book! The final illustration is of a huge light bulb enclosing a miserable little girl, sucking her finger in bewilderment, clutching an old doll, but surrounded by the technology of modern invention and progress - a vacuum cleaner, a radio, an electric fire, etc. The conscious interpretation of the past by the author in the present is obvious here. Seven year-old Jean would not have seen the coming of electricity as "progress" or "change" in those terms, but to the older Jean the harsh illumination of the electric light is symbolic of the greater "light" to which all children must eventually be exposed if they are to grow up in the world beyond the cosy, candle-lit glow of the nursery. At this point the autobiography seems less of a little nursery history and more of a requiem for the passing of childish innocence and security, making way for emotions of sibling jealousy ("like it or not, soon I shall be an only child no longer . . .") and unease at the loss of the familiar cosiness of childhood.

Eve Garnett, the well-known children's writer, says of her own childhood autobiography:

> Some of these chapters of autobiography were originally written for a friend whose children 'wished to know about the author as a little girl'. They have been added to over the years and have been read by others, known and unknown, nearly all of whom have expressed a wish for their publication. A well-known writer once said that to imagine one's infant doings could be of interest outside one's immediate circle demanded a certain modicum of conceit. It has also been frequently asserted that the early years of any autobiography are the most interesting. While largely in agreement with both these statements, today I think there is a third matter for consideration. The war of 1914 changed for ever the whole pattern of living in England. A way of life was swept away - never to return. Those who were children immediately before or during that period will soon have left us. What they saw, felt and did, however trivial or uneventful, will then belong to history. And so it is as history I offer these small rememberings, these 'First Affections' to a wider public. (9)

Here again is the wish to preserve in words a particular but limited way of life, a middle-class childhood, comfortable and sheltered, a world of nannies and nursery governesses, but with its own little traumas and sorrows. Eve Garnett's own autobiography is not quite as cosy as her introduction might lead us to expect. Her mother was extremely jealous of the little girl's affection for her nanny and was unable to understand that ". . . the good-mornings and good-nights, family lunches and even very frequent visits to the nursery were no substitute for one to whose permanent and reassuring presence round the clock one turned instinctively in times of stress". (10) Nanny was accused of stealing Eve's affection and dismissed. The present day Eve remembers the misery caused by this. As an adult she can express the bewildered grief which the young child could not. She says:

> I think both my parents assumed I had 'got over it' as the saying was. What was not realised was the vulnerability of a young child to grief; its limited power of expression; the time-factor . . . days that were as long as twenty days are now. . . (11)

Although her comments and parents and nannies reflect a general situation that was part of the social fabric of middle-class life at the time, there is a strong feeling that this particular incident has rankled for a long time, and that the author needs to talk about it. The book has become personal therapy as well as social history and an exercise in nostalgia.

Nostalgia

Nostalgia appears to be a strong motivation for many popular autobiographies, combining wistfulness for a bygone era with the desire to preserve a way of life that has been "swept away" and a recreation of the self of the past. Some have begun as minor journalism, rather than in book form, with the author subsequently realising that there was potential for a more continuous work when public interest was shown.

The actress and writer Molly Weir began writing about her Glasgow childhood as short talks to be broadcast on Woman's Hour. When these were received with enthusiasm by listeners she wrote a series of autobiographies. Of the publication of the first of these she says:

> I had no idea of the excitement this book would generate. I had hoped my childhood memories might please some folk, but never in my wildest dreams did I expect that everyone in the newspaper world would greet it with such loving enthusiasm. In fact when I held the first copy in my hands (a magic moment) and started to read it as a real book with hard covers, I thought everybody would think I was daft writing about the kitchen range, and the baths, and grannie and me cleaning the brasses. But it turned out that these were the very things everybody pounced on, and it seemed I had truly written "a social document of Glasgow". (12)

The autobiography is indeed a valuable social document, giving insight into a way of life that no longer exists, but running through it from start to finish is the more personal element of the feeling of great closeness - physical as well as emotional - that the young Molly felt for her grandmother. The first volume (13)culminates with the shock and breakdown the author experienced on her grandmother's death when she herself was about twelve years old. The child has to establish a new self to replace the combined identity she had previously had with "grannie". Once again there is the need to "write it out", to relive the trauma in the mind and on the page. In setting down her memories Molly Weir's overt intention was probably, initially at least, the desire to exploit her special "talent to amuse" combined with the nostalgic wish to relive the warmth and difficulties of tenement life; but in recreating her grandmother she has made her come alive again, bridging the gap of pain left by her death. At the outset, when writing little talks for Woman's Hour on the trivia of everyday life in Glasgow just after

the First World War, she probably had no intention of including her personal trauma; it would not have been in keeping with the general tone of the broadcasts. In exploring her own story more deeply she rediscovered and relived the psychological undercurrents in her personal life that were as much part of her makeup as the external life of the Glasgow tenements, finding another kind of truth over and above the factual memories.

Winifred Foley, who was unknown to the public before she began to write about her childhood, had recollections of her early life published in Country Life magazine and in Professor John Burnett's book, Useful Toil (14)before approaching the B.B.C. with the manuscript of her autobiography. They used her story as a serial and then published it as a book. She tells us how she began to write:

> Looking forward into a rapidly shrinking future daunts the boldest spirit; far better to indulge in the comfort of re-living the past. Now I was approaching sixty, sad with long hours of my own company, I fell easy victim to this temptation.
>
> Faces from the past loomed up with an importance magnified by time. Granny, for instance, Granny next door, had been one of the soft cushions that protected me from the harder knocks of childhood. I recalled with guilty pangs how little I had shown my appreciation while she lived. In a fit of contrition I took pen and paper and wrote down my thought about her. I wanted to share my admiration of Granny with others. With only a stamp to lose, I sent it to a quarterly country magazine. It seemed quite an achievement when it was accepted and published, with the added bonus of a six pound cheque! (15)

The first paragraph is clearly an expression of the need for nostalgia, but the mention of "guilty pangs"indicates the author's need to "confess" her sins of omission, recreating her own history with the emphasis on the importance of Granny that she did not fully admit to herself during the old lady's life-time. It is a way of "making it up" to an internalised Granny and, like Molly Weir, giving her a new existence.

Writer and broadcaster Mollie Harris wrote stories about her Oxfordshire childhood for a local magazine; then, like Winifred Foley, she found a wider audience when they were broadcast and made into a book. Her Introduction expresses the typical nostalgic pleasure which motivates so many autobiographers:

> I have called my book "A Kind of Magic" because to me my childhood was a time of magic. I don't mean 'the rabbit in the hat', fairy-godmother-transformation sort, but simple experiences and moments that can be recollected and looked at time and time again - treasured, unforgettable, irreplaceable happenings that I have tried to record here. (16)

Mollie Harris lovingly records the people and events of her small world as she knew and experienced them. She does not offer psychological insight or explanation, acting only as recorder and observer. Nevertheless one suspects that trauma lurks behind the "magic" when she chooses to tell, for example, the following incident: she has just started school at three years old and has been persuaded by older children to recite a naughty verse in class, being too innocent herself to understand its implications:

> There was a deadly hush and then suddenly the air was rent with the loud whacking of Mr. Westwell's cane as it came down on the desk, and I nearly fell off with fright. I noticed he had turned the colour of mother's geraniums. Something was wrong - no clapping from the class, just silence. Suddenly I was seized, turned over and tanned on the backside several times. Bawling and screaming I ran out of the room,round by the pond and the church and home. And my first public appearance was ended. (17)

Most people probably have some totally humiliating infant memory of this kind, where their own innocence was exploited by someone old enough to know better. At the time of the event the unexpected consequences are often inexplicable, so that the child becomes extremely frightened or stressed. The memory may be repressed, or remembered with rankling bitterness and blushing shame for ever more. It is doubtful whether autobiographers who set out to write fragments of nostalgic social history have any conscious desire to come to terms with infant traumas but this is, in effect, what often happens. The process of autobiography, answering as it does to the needs of the present as well as those of the past, seems to bring such memories to the fore, so that even in fairly simple and straightforward autobiographies such as those mentioned so far they creep in almost inadvertently, creating a tension between the author's stated intention of looking back at childhood as "a slice of social history" or "a kind of magic" and the occasional nightmare that appears on the page. Freud's "talking cure" is widely accepted as therapy for repressed and traumatic states of memory; in talking

about early distress the autobiographer acts as spokesman for the child who, as Eve Garnett says, has "limited power of expression", linking past and present selves and offering explanation and comfort to both.

Social History

Many autobiographers who seek to recreate the world of their childhood do so without reference to the wider world outside their own small neighbourhood, and if their work is acclaimed as "a social document"like Molly Weir's it is by accident rather than design. Others set out with a wider purpose, apparently motivated by a desire to explain or expose a more general condition of mankind, suggesting a political rather than a personal stance. A.L. Rowse writes of his Cornish boyhood in a working-class family and neighbourhood in terms of personal, family and social experience very much akin to that of the autobiographers already mentioned in this chapter, but his own idiosyncratic comments throughout the book give it a wider application. Of his motivation and intention he says in his Preface of 1942:

> This Autobiography has its origins in a very far-going and severe illness a few years ago which I was afraid I might not survive. As I lay in hospital in London, it was some consolation to turn back in my mind to the surroundings of my childhood in Cornwall, along with its memories to evoke its very atmosphere, to enter once more into its feeling . . . As it formed in my mind, it struck me that such a book might have a distinctive contribution of its own to make to our literature. For, numerous as have been the autobiographies of the past, almost all have come from the upper or middle class, and most recent ones of distinction . . . have a public-school background. There are very few autobiographies that come out of the working class and reveal its ways of behaviour and feeling from within, its standards and reflections upon itself. And it is curious, considering that since the war of 1914-1918 a whole generation has come up in the normal course from elementary and secondary school to the university, forming almost a new educated class, that not a single autobiography has yet appeared, as far as I know, which gives any account of that process of education and emergence . . . I hope that the book may reveal something of the inner process of a working-class child's education, and may have some value for the discussions as to the future shaping of our educational system. (18)

Although he initially mentions "consolation" and suggests the strong nostalgia factor, the extract offers, on the whole, a very high-minded, public-spirited intention. We follow the author through his family background, experiences of school and social life, awakening aesthetic

experience, transition to Oxford - how a working-class boy worked his way up through the educational opportunities of the time and how he felt about it all. However, despite the high-minded intentions we also see flashes of deep bitterness which are part of "how it felt"; they are also indicative of Rowse's own makeup. When he started school young Rowse suddenly realised that the way the family spoke at home was not always acceptable in the outside world. He remembers being sent to a shop for what was called at home, "gurts":

> When I asked at the shop for 'gurts' the supercilious young woman affected not to know what I wanted, and at last as a great concession suggested, 'Oh, it's groats you mean.' My reaction was a very active one: shame, humiliation, indignation with the young woman and a rising tide of anger with the stupidity at home which was responsible for the humiliation. Tears of vexation burned in my eyes all the way up the road, and arriving with the precious packet I threw it on the table, adding: 'and if you want to know' (this very cuttingly) 'it's not called gurts, but groats' - and flung out. (19)

He adds that his mother "didn't mind a scrap and couldn't have learned if she had minded" nor did his brother who, Rowse tells us, "in consequence finds himself, at over forty, a lorry-driver". He himself, as a result of this sort of experience, determined to learn to speak "correct" English. His angry feelings of humiliation and of having been let down by those whom he could reasonably expect to regard as his protectors, and to "know best", are typical of some of the expressions of childhood distress already mentioned. The inclusion of this bitter little memory is in accord with his stated intention of describing how it felt to be a working-class boy acquiring education and being ignorant through no fault of his own. The realisation of social disadvantage and class differences has proved the spur to upward mobility for many working-class children and the incident is relevant to Rowse's design. However, the comments about his family are the reactions of one working-class boy in a specific instance; they are made for his own benefit, comparing himself with them as a way of measuring how far he has "come up" because he is not like them. The fact that he considers his mother and brother a couple of fools who refused to better themselves (a comment which he later makes about the working-class in general) has little to add to his purpose of offering information which may be of

"some value for the discussions as to the future shaping of our educational system". There is an indication of Rycroft's element of self-aggrandisement - a demonstration of "look how clever I am; see what fools these others are who have not chosen to follow my path". Behind the stated intention of a sociological and political purpose there is a deeper, possibly unacknowledged, intention of reliving the pains of youth and coming to terms with them. In effect what he does with the "gurts" incident is to describe the pain and humiliation, but then go on to say what he did as a result of it that made it, ultimately, beneficial to him, thus deadening the pain. Thus the autobiography becomes, despite its somewhat priggish and high-minded Preface, an intensely personal account and the selection and use of memories is reflected in this. It is possible that Rowse later realised that the book had not turned out quite as he had intended. In a recent radio broadcast he said that his professional interest prompted him to write a social history of the locality of his childhood, but the book became more personal as he wrote it. (20) It is illustrative of the strength and influence of the emotional experiences of childhood that even a professional historian could not shut them out of his autobiography.

Hannah Mitchell was born into a very poor Derbyshire farming family in 1871 and later became what the title of her autobiography describes as a "Suffragette and rebel". (21) She says that an old friend suggested that she should write her memoirs (completed round about 1946) adding that "our contemporaries and even some of our young friends, would enjoy reading the account". She remarks:

> An autobiography is perhaps not quite the place for a dissertation on social reform, except in so far as one's own efforts have been devoted to such matters, but it is a glorious opportunity to talk about oneself. I have therefore tried to present a fairly comprehensive picture of my struggle to obtain some measure of personal freedom, and to leave some mark, however faint, on the sands of time. (22)

Like Rowse, Hannah Mitchell uses her own life as representative of the frustrations, ideals and struggles of many others - in her own case, women in particular - of her class, with the intention of making a social as well as a personal document. She brings in far more external factors than the earlier group mentioned as initially nostalgic autobiographers - social and industrial legislation, for

example. However, her gleeful remark that writing autobiography is "a glorious opportunity to talk about oneself" is indicative of motive not only in herself but in most autobiographers. The other autobiographers mentioned so far in this chapter have gone to some pains to offer reasons for writing their life stories: that someone especially asked to hear about it, that it will be useful social history, that tribute needs to be paid to a person now dead, and so on - as though to talk about oneself were not quite the done thing. Far from indulging in self-aggrandisement, most seem to feel that they should not be writing about themselves at all without the real or prospective reader who "needs" the information they offer, or whom they can amuse and entertain. Whether this modesty is real or assumed it is hard to tell, but most people do love to talk about themselves and the motive which Hannah Mitchell so honestly ascribes to herself might be added to that of any autobiographer. Fortunately many people enjoy reading about the lives of others, satisfying their curiosity, experiencing fellow feeling and trying to understand how they have felt and lived. This universal motive for writing autobiography needs no justification!

When autobiographers do not state their motives and intentions these may often be inferred from the way in which their texts are written and the kind of material they use, or from introductory material. Robert Roberts was born in a Salford slum in 1905. His desire to tell his own story whilst at the same time acting as spokesman for those disadvantaged people from the past who had no voice of their own is indicated in one of the quotations which precedes the text:

> We know little or nothing today of the multitude of people who inhabit these islands. They produce no authors. They edit no newspapers. They find no vocal expression for their sentiments and desires. Their leaders are either drawn from another class or, from the very fact of their leadership, sharply distinguished from members of their own. They are never articulate except in times of exceptional excitement; in depression when trade is bad; in exuberance when, as on 'Mafeking' nights, they suddenly appear from nowhere to take possession of the city. (23)

Another way in which Roberts indicates his wider intentions of exposing social and class evils is when he refers to incidents outside his own experience. For example, this reference to the

local "dosshouse", using ironic contrast to illustrate the gulf between the rich and the poor:

> . . . a bed cost twopence a night, one couldn't be hired for a day. By ten o'clock every morning all beds in a common lodging had to be vacated and made again, ready for the evening. A municipal inspector called regularly, and any man found too ill to rise was removed at once to the workhouse. This law encouraged lodgers to be up and out on the 'early bird' principle, and since in 1902, for instance, more than 100,000 men were tramping the roads of England, besides the normal unemployed, competition was naturally keen. To dissuade seekers from asking charity en route, in 1901, as a warning to the rest, more than sixteen thousand 'beggars' were sent to prison. Not, of course, that all men lay in poor straits: some were managing quite well. Lord Derby, for instance, still owned seventy thousand acres; had the choice of eight establishments to live in, besides Knowsley Hall . . . (24)

Roberts was not born until 1905, so can hardly have been in a position to have made such observations at the time! They are not, strictly speaking, relevant to his own childhood experience, but to his purpose in showing the kind of conditions which he is concerned to record and how they fitted into the social stratification of the time.

While Roberts' autobiography fulfills its apparent intention of telling us about life in one of the worst slums of the age, it also reveals the boy's growing dislike of his father, obliquely telling us much about himself and his great sympathy for his mother. At the end of the book Roberts tells us that his mother was "Never a Mrs. Lawrence, 'cringing' for her sons' love". (25) This is no chance reference, for Roberts' family situation (as he sees it) is very like that of Lawrence and his autobiographical hero, Paul Morel. (26) Like Paul, Roberts' passionate feeling for his mother leaves little room for sympathy for his father, so that it is unlikely that we are being offered an unbiased picture of the man. Just as Paul feels little compassion for the father who must work at a back-breaking job that he himself would hate to do, so Roberts fails to sympathise with his father's desire to be free from the tyranny of industrial labour, even though he feels exactly the same in his first job. At the beginning of the book he describes his father's position before he took over the shop which offered hope of freedom from drudgery:

> A mechanic of high skill, he was engaged at that time, a period of depression, with a firm of engineers in Derbyshire. To get there he rose each day at 4.30a.m. and returned about eight o'clock in the evening, 'grey with exhaustion', my mother said, 'though he was a strong man'. 'Derbyshire bloody slave-drivers!' he told her. 'They like to have you staggerin' out holdin' on to the wall as you leave! That's what they call a fair day's work! A goddam non-union shop, of course!' Business of any sort, he must have felt, might at least save him from that sort of bondage. And soon our clan claimed yet another little shop-keeper. (27)

The tone of this passage is ambivalent. At the outset there seems to be sympathy for anyone who had to work in such terrible conditions, but this is his mother's description and does not necessarily reflect Roberts' own views. These come through at the end, when he describes his father disparagingly as "yet another little shop-keeper", belittling the venture at its outset. At the end of the autobiography Roberts tells his mother how much he dislikes his own menial factory job:

> 'I hate it!' I broke out. 'Every single minute of it. It's a rotten, stupid thing! I'd rather be dead than go on doing it. And living here,' I went on, 'in this filthy, miserable dump all our lives!' (28)

Roberts is able to sympathise with his own plight and that of the masses but seems blind to any fellow-feeling for his father that their parallel situations might have given him. He uses the incident to highlight his own woes and his compassion for his mother and the plight to which, in his view, "that old toper" (his father) has brought her. Every reference to his father is weighted against him by the words used - "the Old Man" being his usual way of referring to him. Sympathy is directed towards his mother on every possible occasion, prompting the suspicion that there is the same unacknowledged Oedipal reason for his selection and manipulation of personal memories as is to be found in Lawrence's Sons and Lovers.

Therapy

The therapeutic value of autobiography has already become clear. This is particularly so in relation to the traumas of childhood, a time when vulnerability is at its greatest because the child has so little control over its own life. In a recent programme broadcast about child abuse a Hackney social worker said that "It is important for the social worker to share all the painful experiences that the

child has gone through". (29) Writing about unhappy experiences provides a similar form of therapy, with the reader as listener and sharer. The novelist "Miss Read" (Dora Saint) said in a radio interview that she wrote her autobiography mainly for her daughters "as a little slice of social history"; she added that so many autobiographers had a chip on their shoulders about their dreadful childhoods, but she thought the majority of people had kindly, uneventful childhoods and she wished to write about one such. (30) That, of course, is her choice, and no doubt she has selected her memories accordingly - even though the fact that a beloved grandmother killed herself because she feared becoming a burden to her family does strike a discordant note! However, some people did have dreadful childhoods and have every right to depict them as such. We would expect their selection of memories to reflect this; to pick out a few happy memories from a sea of unhappy ones would give a totally false picture. Such autobiographers often weave their lives into the social fabric, especially when this in itself may be a prime cause of their misery. We learn quite a lot about this background, often as much as from the more outward-looking social-historical type of autobiography, but personal misery or unease is paramount, with the background used as a metaphor to reinforce the author's own unhappiness.

The structure of Helen Forrester's first volume of autobiography leads us to understand her motivation: she returned, after many years' absence abroad, to the city of Liverpool, where she spent her formative years. Her Canadian-born son reacted strongly to the city's dirt:

> He looked at me derisively and said, with all the cold logic of a five-year-old, "They should use more soap and - wash the streets." (31)

His comments took her back to her own, similar reactions when, as a child of twelve, also from a different, privileged, cleaner background, she first saw Liverpool:

> My smile faded, as cold shadows of winters past crept over me. That was how I had felt, when first I had really looked at the city and not passed through it as a traveller. God, how I had minded the dirt! How terrified I had been! How menacingly grotesque the people had looked; children of the industrial revolution, nurtured for generations on poor food in smoke-laden air, grim and twisted, foul-mouthed and coarse . . . Gone was the protection of money and privilege; I had to make what I could of this grimy city and its bitterly humourous inhabitants and share with them their suffering during the Depression years. (32)

The need to recall and come to terms with the initial shock of poverty and the terrible years that followed provide Helen Forrester's motivation. Her intention is to show her own progress from despair towards hope and resolution. At the end of the book she shows her particular way out of her trapped existence through evening classes:

> The welcoming doorway was my hoping door; the worn stone steps my ladder to the start. Kind hands, earnest people, were there to help me up them.
>
> I bared my yellow teeth in a smile of pure happiness, charged across the threshold and galloped up the stairs. (33)

In a radio interview eleven years after the publication of her first volume of autobiography, Helen Forrester cast further light on her motivation and intention in writing the book. She was married and living in Canada, where the wives of her circle were preoccupied with bridge and dinner parties, and began writing out of boredom. She published a novel about Canada and was accused of writing about something of which she knew nothing. This, she said, made her "so mad" that she sat down and wrote about her childhood in Liverpool, which she did know about. She received "many sympathetic letters from others with equally rotten parents", adding: "People relate to what I have to say . . . on Merseyside people are very depressed . . . it's nice to read someone who understands". (34)

In autobiography sympathy is reciprocal; not only do readers like to feel that someone understands a similar predicament to theirs, but autobiographers also like to feel that their sufferings receive sympathy, especially if they have not done so at the time of their occurrence. A skilful writer will naturally select and arrange his memories in order to exploit this reciprocal sympathy to the maximum, keeping as far as possible to the truth, yet perhaps never quite free from unadmitted or unconscious motives. Helen Forrester admitted that Twopence to Cross the Mersey, the first part of her autobiography, is her favourite "because it was such a resounding success". This may appear to indicate a cynical notion that autobiographers are mainly motivated by considerations of finance or fame, but one suspects that even if it had been a total failure she would still have felt an enormous sense of relief at having lived through her trauma again, observed and recreated herself, and felt gratified at having fought

her way out of that life in spite of crushing obstacles. This is all part of the healing process of autobiography; the sympathetic letters from readers must have made it all the more effective.

Ronald Fraser was initially motivated to look back on his childhood because its traumas left him with an emotional unease about the period. His autobiography is clearly written as part of his self-healing process, but few autobiographers of this type, who have felt ill-at-ease with their early lives, state their purpose so directly. Nevertheless, this feeling of being at odds with one's family, social setting, or just oneself as opposed to the more readily understandable trauma resulting from material deprivation or cruelty, pervades so many autobiographies that it is reasonable to assume that this feeling of being "different", or an "outsider" is a strong motivation for writing them. The trauma is relived by thinking about the past in order to come to terms with it, explaining it to the world in the hope of receiving sympathy or understanding, or by showing how the author "escaped" from a given situation, as Helen Forrester and Ronald Fraser both do in their different ways.

Just as memory tends to select events which stand out from everyday routine, so some autobiographers appear to be motivated to write about themselves because they feel that their lives were, in some way, outside the accepted norm, resulting in confusion of identity and the need to search for self-understanding in the autobiographical process. Some of these misfits were handicapped from birth either by unfortunate circumstances or some characteristic of their own makeup which is not, or was not, considered normal or acceptable socially or morally. Catherine Cookson and Janet Hitchman were both born illegitimately in the earlier part of this century; both are motivated by the need to explain and come to terms with the pain of feeling that they were outsiders and unwanted, as well as being morally culpable through no fault of their own. A further motivation is pity for other children in the same situation and the desire to act as spokesman for them as well as for themselves. The overall intention of their autobiographies is thus philanthropic as well as personal. Part of Catherine Cookson's intention is that her autobiography shall act as a plea for understanding and alleviation of

the pain and stigma of illegitimacy. In the verses she uses as a Dedication for the autobiography she says:

> . . . Ask that this law
> That breeds a stigma,
> That reeks its stench on woman
> And calls her offspring
> Bastard,
> Be changed. (35)

Janet Hitchman offers a similar hope that her autobiography will have brought about change; at its end she says:

> If I have offended anybody I am sorry. The institutions I have criticised have since improved out of knowledge; perhaps people like myself, who were articulate enough to complain and barbaric enough to make nuisances of themselves, brought about some of the improvements. (36)

Catherine Cookson remarks:

> The painful times would seem to dominate the memories of my childhood. But there were other times. Nearly every night after tea, and when I had been for the beer, I went out to play for a while . . . (37)

After only one page about some of the games that were played, her memories revert to the courting couples in the back lane, and the reflection that:

> . . . courting in the front room was only sanctioned by the, morally speaking, broad parents, and this, as was well known, led to a quick wedding and evoked the remark, 'Well, what d'ya expect. It was askin' for it'. (38)

The reference to her play time is not only brief, but is hedged in by the thought of the humiliation, which she details elsewhere in the book, of having to go and fetch the beer in a stone jar for all to see and comment on, and an allusion to illicit conceptions. The passage is immediately followed by a reversion to the personal trauma of her own illegitimacy and the embarrassment of having a different name on her birth certificate from that of her mother, who had forged her father's name. The memories of going out to play most evenings, which must have formed quite a large part of her childhood, have been submerged by her dominant intention of examining the memories connected with her illegitimacy and her relationship with her mother. There is none of the joy in looking back at childhood pleasures that is found in the group mentioned earlier - Weir, Metcalfe, Harris - who exploit memories of "bygones" and the play dimension of their lives and, for all we know, consciously or

unconsciously reject the use of many memories of trauma and unhappiness because they are not part of their design.

A feeling of "difference" of another kind is explained by Elizabeth Wilson. (39) The focus of her selection of memories is her own sexual ambiguity and her attempts to define it, combined with her "escape" from the pattern of conformity expected of a nice "Young Girl" from the middle-class growing up after the Second World War. She spends only thirty-one pages on her childhood - just enough to establish the seeds of her non-conformity and attempts to break away from the stereotypes. There is no interest in the "play" aspects of early life because it is no part of her intention to display those particular memories. Her ultimate intention is to explain not only her own problems, but also the confusions felt by other lesbian women about themselves, their place in society and in the women's movements.

Setting the Record Straight

The autobiographies mentioned so far have shown little of the defensive or declamatory tone that could indicate a motive of self-justification or self-aggrandisement in their selection of memories. This may because, although some of them may be described as "well-known", "popular" or even "celebrated", none of them could be called "famous" or "infamous", nor do they live in the public eye. In his Introduction to Kathleen Dayus' book about her early life in Birmingham (a "dreadful childhood"!) the editor describes another type of auto-biographer:

> Autobiographies are usually written by people who have witnessed or been involved in great events, or who have themselves performed notable feats or known famous people. They tend to present the public with their memoirs in order to set the record straight or to forestall historical judgement. They give their own, necessarily biased, personal viewpoint of the events of their lives. (40)

The idea that "autobiographies are usually written by people who have witnessed or been involved in great events" is belied by the flood of those produced by quite ordinary people in recent years, and all autobiographers offer a biased view and write to "set the record straight" to a large extent. However, only those in the public eye need fear historical judgement. These will be public figures such as actors, pop-stars, politicians, high-ranking

military personnel, etc., whose lives may be the subject of public curiosity and speculation. They may wish to enhance their public image or offer their own version of events before someone else does so to their detriment. Many will be memoirs, offering a personal view of public events, often seeking to justify the author's own part in them. Over-emphasis on this part and exaggeration of its importance can lead to suspicions of self-justification and self-aggrandisement.

An example of this type of autobiography is Sir Oswald Mosley's My Life. (41) His memories are carefully selected and arranged in order to justify and aggrandise his own actions and opinions, and one of his intentions appears to be to act as spokesman for a better Britain. At the outset he attempts to establish his credentials in the reader's mind, representing himself as a "true Briton" of ancient lineage and tracing his ancestors back to the reign of King John. His foresight and better grasp of situations than anyone else is frequently mentioned, even at an early age, giving rise to suspicions of retrospective adjustment of the facts. He tells us that when he himself was about twenty-five his father had inherited an estate, but "I persuaded him to sell the house and the estate, foreseeing the ruin of agriculture which politics were bringing and feeling that I could best serve the country in a political life at Westminster". (42) Later he tells us confidently that the policies he advocated could have averted a Second World War. Speaking of the holocaust and saying how strongly he condemns the killing of innocent people, he remarks blandly, "Most people go rather mad in war, and Hitler in this respect went very mad". (43) He insists that the ordinary Germans "had not the least idea these crimes were being committed" (44) and they would not have happened had there not been a war. "After the war", he tells us with typical over-assurance, "my policies were deliberately in advance of the time. . ." (45) He has an answer to most of the world's problems. His plan for Africa, for example, is to divide the continent neatly into two areas - one for blacks and the other for whites - apartheid on a massive scale which takes no account of tribal configurations, human feelings or the reality of the situation. Such over-whelming confidence in the author does little to ensure equal confidence in the reader and is likely to

make him wonder just what version of the truth, or even commonsense, he is receiving. Mosley says of his autobiography: "My purpose is not to write history, but to explain a personal course in life". (46) This is not acceptable as an intention in the circumstances. A man so concerned with public policies and so full of ideas to set the course of events cannot opt out of writing about the course of European history with his life story; the two are inextricably connected. If he feels that this stated purpose gives him leave to omit or distort the facts of public life this is, again, unacceptable, as it is a way of re-writing history. The reader's credibility will be lost. His unacknowledged motivation must be bewilderment and disappointment that his life has, somehow, taken a wrong course and resulted in failure. A man as confident in his own judgement as Mosley is unlikely to admit, even to himself, that he may have been mistaken. His autobiography may have been a last, desperate chance to convince the world of his rightness, but we are left with the impression of a warped idealist who cannot accept the rejection of his ideals.

It seems then that many things motivate people to write their life stories: the approach of old age, nostalgia, the desire to interest or amuse others, the need to plead a cause. These are the typical motivations which are offered, or which can reasonably be assumed from the text. There are other motivations which are fairly general but which usually go unacknowledged: the desire for fame or financial reward, for instance, and sometimes the need for self-justification or self-aggrandisement. There is also the deep-seated, usually unstated, motivation allied to Rycroft's "confession" - the need for therapy, the need to "talk it out". Whatever the initial motivation and subsequent intention of the autobiography, this therapeutic element appears very frequently even in autobiographies which start out as the simple social-historical type. Thus any clear intention the writer may have had in his choice and use of memories is blurred by other memories which arise from the unconscious and divert him from that intention. This is an essential part of the process of self-discovery but creates tension between what the author sets out to do and what he actually <u>does</u>, revealing deep, unconscious motives. There will be two kinds of "truth" - that which is shown

by facts and that which is shown by implication - not only the implications of the sub-text but by the interpretation of the ways in which the autobiographer has used the facts as he sees them. For example, Helen Forrester asserts that her parents were appalling; this, to her, is a fact of her life; she sees them as the instruments of the oppression from which she demonstrates her escape. Her reasoms for writing the autobiography have already been mentioned, but is there not another motivation here, unadmitted, unworthy, yet wholly understandable - that of revenge? Fame, fortune and therapy might all have been achieved by offering the story as fiction; is there not a suspicion that the ultimate satisfaction is from putting the horrors of childhood, complete with real names, before the world for judgement? If this is so, this motivation may be attributed to many of those who write about their "dreadful childhoods", like Janet Hitchman and Catherine Cookson, despite their protestations of wishing to help others in their situation.

We can never be quite sure of any author's motivation and intention and, as he is probably never quite sure of it himself, it is obviously unwise to take autobiography at face value. We must ask if what is said in the text squares with any stated or apparent motivation and intention. Does the tone or style belie the content? Oswald Mosley writes in confident tones about a life which is a wrong-headed failure; J. R. Ackerley writes about his sad life, full of disappointment and regret, in tones of comic irony. (47) We must ask what these discrepancies tell us about the author and try to understand the message behind his words.

We are not likely to find "pure" intention or expect from it "pure" meaning. Autobiography is as mysterious and teasing as the individuals who write it. Any statement which the autobiographer makes or implies about motivation and intention may help us to understand why he has written the book, why he has chosen and arranged particular memories or information as he has, but this should only be regarded as a starting point and not the key that opens all doors to understanding. Both motivation and intention are distorted by unconscious factors. Initially the intention may shape the memories, but ultimately the memories shape the intention.

CHAPTER TWO

MOTIVATION AND INTENTION

1 Roy Pascal, Design and Truth in Autobiography, pp.62-63
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3 Charles Rycroft, "Viewpoint, Analysis and the Autobiographer", Times Literary Supplement, 27th May, 1983, p.451
4 W. K. Wimsatt, The Verbal Icon, p.3
5 Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory: an Introduction, p.69
6 George Brown, In My Way: the Political Memoirs of Lord George Brown
7 Jean Metcalfe, Sunnylea, Preface
8 Ibid, p.60
9 Eve Garnett, First Affections, Preface
10 Ibid, p.33
11 Ibid, p.40

Nostalgia

12 Molly Weir, Spinning Like a Peerie, p.216
13 Ibid, Shoes Were for Sunday
14 Winifred Foley, "Winifred Foley, General Maid", in Useful Toil, ed. John Burnett, pp.226-234
15 Winifred Foley, Back to the Forest, pp.181-2
16 Mollie Harris, A Kind of Magic, p.4
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19 Ibid, p.103
20 B.B.C. Radio 4, 13th November, 1982
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23 Robert Roberts, A Ragged Schooling, p.7; quotation from G. F. K. Masterman, The Condition of England
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25 Ibid, p.189
26 David Herbert Lawrence, Sons and Lovers
27 Roberts, op.cit., p.10
28 Ibid, p.188

Therapy

29 Anonymous contributor, Woman's Hour, B.B.C. Radio 4, 8th August, 1985
30 "Miss Read", pseud. (Dora Saint) Woman's Hour, 19th October, 1983
31 Helen Forrester, Twopence to Cross the Mersey, p.8
32 Ibid, p.8
33 Ibid, p.224
34 Bookshelf, B.B.C. Radio 4, 13th October, 1985
35 Catherine Cookson, Our Kate, Dedication

36 Janet Hitchman, The King of the Barbareens, acknowledgments following p.221
37 Cookson, op.cit., p.49
38 Ibid, p.51
39 Elizabeth Wilson, Mirror Writing

Setting the Record Straight

40 Kathleen Dayus, Her People, anonymous Introduction
41 Oswald Mosley, My Life
42 Ibid, p.17
43 Ibid, p.371
44 Ibid, p.370
45 Ibid, p.464
46 Ibid, p.106
47 J. R. Ackerley, My Father and Myself

CHAPTER THREE

TYPES OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY: MOTIVATION FORM AND STYLE

The purpose of any classification, or division, of material is to break down an unwieldy mass into manageable, homogenous groups for the purposes of easier access and study. The amount of published autobiography is now very large and is growing rapidly. Critics are finding fruitful areas for study in various aspects of form, style, subject matter and psychology within the genre and are now attempting to identify types of autobiography in order to define or confine their particular interests. Whilst looking at the divisions they suggest it may be relevant to ask whether types of autobiography are, in fact, readily identifiable and, if so, whether there seem to be any reasons why autobiographers choose one type rather than another. Does this choice have any relationship to the apparent motivation and purpose, for instance, or to the truths and personality which they wish to show or conceal?

Although autobiographers are often keen to offer explanations of their motivation and intention, and also their choice of subject matter, I know of none who give reasons for their choice of form and style. It would be naive, considering the difficulties already indicated in assessing the nature of truth, motivation and intention, to assume that the autobiographer just writes in the style that comes naturally to him. His work will be conditioned by a combination of factors. Current and past models will have some influence. The experienced writer, or even the intelligent beginner, will be aware of successful contemporary autobiography and will use those features of it which appeal to him and are in harmony with his intentions. If he is hoping for financial reward he will doubtless look closely at those who have achieved commercial success, analysing and using the elements which he thinks may have contributed to this. Whilst the choice of style, etc., is yet another step in the process of selectivity, there is no way of proving that an autobiographer has chosen a particular way of writing for a particular reason; it will be more useful to study the general indications of what happens to autobiography when a specific form or style is used rather than to look too closely at individual cases. This will be done in conjunction with examination of the types of autobiography suggested by critics and any other divisions which seem relevant.

The types of motivation and intention suggested in the preceding chapter indicate possible groupings which provide a convenient starting point for discussion. These were the three broad groupings of social and family history, therapy, and setting the record straight. At first sight these three offer divisions into which most autobiographies will fall fairly readily. The autobiographer who aspires to write his autobiography partly as family or social history will offer an interesting personal story, often nostalgic, giving a vivid picture of life in a particular place or time. The therapeutic type will be more complex, often puzzling, going back and forth in time and in the author's mind and life in search of an elusive self. When an autobiographer writes ostensibly to set the record straight there will be plenty of facts - dates, names and places - often taken from diary entries or contemporary records, with not too much introspection or accounts of trauma. However, as has already been demonstrated, autobiographies are not necessarily "pure" in intention or execution. Although many do have distinct leanings towards one category rather than another there is frequently considerable overlap. Writing family or social history may also be a way of setting the record straight and a means of therapy. If, for example, a relationship with a parent has been unsatisfactory, a saga of family history which gives an account of this may well be a therapeutic attempt to come to terms with that failure. The term "setting the record straight" has implications of "memoirs" and impersonality, but it may be an unacknowledged way of administering therapy by reconstructing the autobiographer's relationship with the world at large and attempting to identify his own place in it. The protagonist may be offering a defence against the world on behalf of a past self which may have been rejected or misunderstood by it.

Another simple division is by <u>form</u>. Most autobiography is written in continuous prose, but this can be a series of loosely connected essays, a straightforward chronological account which begins with the author's date of birth and ends with the most recent significant event, or a highly structured work - often by a professional novelist - which switches back and forth in time for full dramatic effect.

An autobiography written in the form of essays usually consists of self-contained chapters, each dealing with a separate topic related to the author's life, though there is frequently a connecting time-thread. Those who choose this form will undoubtedly be influenced by past models, but it may also be chosen because the work had its origins in the separately published pieces of journalism already indicated in the work of such writers as Mollie Harris and Winifred Foley. The author has already established that the work has commercial possibilities and continues to use the form in which it originated. By concentrating on one subject at a time the author may tend to distort both time and emotion, so that the peaks and troughs of normal life are avoided. A wealth of amusing detail about aunts, games, siblings, etc. may lead to a considerable masking of the protagonist's emotions and feelings, or they may be so spread about the book that it is difficult to find a consistent picture of him.

The autobiography written in linear chronology varies from the memoir, packed with external facts, to the highly subjective personal account of the author's inner struggles towards some specified objective. It is the commonest form of both autobiography and its related genre, the novel, so it is the one most likely to be used as a model. Its popularity is well-proven, fulfilling as it does the reader's expectations of "a good read", similar to history if he prefers memoirs, or the novel if he likes a good story. Events follow each other in continuous and connected sequence, giving a satisfying completeness and shape to the protagonist's life. The autobiographer may, consciously or unconsciously, have chosen this form because it satisfies his desire to see some sort of order imposed on what may be a chaotic life. Events that were puzzling may take on new meaning by being put into juxtaposition with others and connections made. If only the author can get things into the "right" order, explanations may be forthcoming . . . When well done, the effect is very "real", very convincing, but if the essay form has too <u>few</u> connections, the chronological form can have too <u>many</u>. The connections may not, in fact, be the right ones; events do not necessarily explain each other because they follow in chronological order. The pattern may be imposed with hindsight, and with a host of events between the chosen connections omitted. The "reality" may be partly an illusion, though

it will still represent autobiographical truth as the author's chosen way of selecting and arranging the events which make up his life.

Many autobiographies which avoid the use of strict linear chronology may be inspired by an admired model and, in this century, also by a growing awareness of the complexities of the self revealed by psycho-analytical theory. The author will be aware that life has not been a series of continuously conneeting events, but rather a series of highly disturbing "happenings" which only connect, if at all, when set down and analysed by author and reader as best they can. In his article on autobiography Peter Abbs quotes Edwin Muir as saying: "I can never know myself. We are always and forever more than we can symbolically grasp". (1) Abbs goes on to comment:

> Such a view could be taken to define the limitations of the form. Alternatively, it could be seen as a further challenge of the dominant convention in autobiography in its use of the chronological and historical narrative. Is it not possible to write an autobiography which captures the truth of experience, with its uncertainties, gaps, aspirations, visions and banalities, without relying on the method of linear chronology? Does this hint at the next development in autobiographical recreation? (2)

Abbs' "next development" has already become an established part of the genre. A good example is Ackerley's My Father and Myself (3), where the author plays with time in order to add to the suspense of the story and also to reflect his own bewilderment at the very lack of a "normal" time sequence in his own life. The startling fact with which he opens the story - that his parents were not married until twenty-four years after his birth - is an example of this. He does not tell us immediately why this was so, partly because he himself was unaware of the situation for most of his early life, and partly because he wishes to reserve the information for the time in his autobiography when revelations about his father are in the air. Ackerley's autobiography captures the experience, uncertainties, gaps etc. which Abbs hopes to see, without reliance on linear chronology, but it also illustrates some of the limitations of its type. It offers endless possibilites for dramatising life, for highlighting the more sensational events and emotions, omitting moments of non-being almost entirely, so that the personality of the author may be masked, or deliberately hidden, behind the activities of the protagonist and the excitement of the narrative. The author has, of course, every

right to represent his life in this way, but the reader should ask what the style says about the author's state of mind and intentions.

Critics offer divisions which begin to suggest the psychological complexity of the genre. Wayne Shumaker quotes Waldo H. Dunn's suggestion of two types of autobiography:

> The one type, the record chiefly of outward events, the writer considering himself merely part of the historical current; the other, the record of inner events, of the soul's struggles on the journey through life, the writer considering himself as individual, well-nigh isolated. (4)

Shumaker himself offers a very similar division into two main types - subjective and non-subjective. (5) In both his and Dunn's suggested divisions there is likely to be blurring because, although autobiographies incline towards one group rather than another, by the nature of their revelation, tone and style, there may be considerably overlapping. An initial attempt to write about outward events in an objective way frequently turns into a confession of inner struggle. Outward events often play an important part in the autobiographies of those who feel themselves "isolated" (by which I assume Dunn means spiritual or emotional isolation, rather than a physical state) or have a strong sense of individuality. Nowadays this isolation might be more aptly described as alienation, implying that the individual is at odds with his social setting. Such an autobiographer will need to set his protagonist against a strong social background so that he can demonstrate the reasons for his alienation and the individuality which he thinks marks him out from the rest of humanity. The illegitimate children cited in the preceding section, Catherine Cookson and Janet Hitchman, are an example of this. Neither book would have been effective without a vividly evoked background, yet the protagonists are alienated from this and the point of view is subjective. Even those autobiographers whose work apparently falls into the non-subjective group - usually the memoir type - have already been seen to reveal subjective truths about themselves.

The above may be summed up as an attempt to divide by point of view. William L. Howarth suggests division by <u>style</u> into three main types. He calls his first category <u>Autobiography as Oratory</u>, saying:

> The character and technique of oratorical autobiography make its theme obviously apparent. The theme is vocation, the special summons that guided an entire life's work and now its story. Work made the story, story remakes the work . . . (6)

Of his second category, Autobiography as Drama, he says:

> Regardless of background or interests, all share a common preference for histrionics over dialectics, for acting instead of exhorting . . . The dramatic autobiographer plays so many roles, from naif to schemer, that his exact identity is often a mystery . . . His style contrives not to prove but to portray a colloquial, conversational and apparently spontaneous mind . . . Action, not exposition becomes the author's principal tool, so his persona usually blurs its narrator and protagonist roles into one . . . (7)

Thirdly he identifies Autobiography as Poetry. He says of those who write it:

> They share equally strong doubts, especially about their current state of mind. Uncertain of the present, they study the past for some explanation of their later difficulties. They are a moody, unpredictable lot, strongly critical of themselves and others, committed only to the right to change their ideas . . . He writes solely for himself, in the lyric genre, but the hero of his book is its reader, who alone can master its final form . . . When a writer does not fully understand his purpose, he can only portray himself as a serial image; his reader has to provide the missing continuity . . . If a poetic autobiographer lacks conviction, he at least permits us to witness his continuing experiments, successful or not. (8)

These divisions offer interesting possibilities, cutting across the rather over-simplified ideas of subjectiveness or non-subjectiveness, but the problem of that is once again that of overlap. As soon as a work is placed into one category it begins to fit equally well into another, or bedfellows seem so widely different as to be incongruous. The first, Autobiography as Oratory, appears the simplest, but even here difficulties arise. "Oratory" suggests rhetoric rather than a plain statement of facts, with the intention of heightening the effect in order to convert or convince. No doubt authors of religious confessions and a modern writer such as Oswald Mosley chose this mode with this intention, but the themes of "vocation" and "life's work" apply equally well to the many auto-biographies of famous actors, for example, who merely wish to tell their stories interestingly, with accurate references to places and people, but without the use of forceful argument or any desire for conversion to their point of view.

It is difficult to see Autobiography as Drama as a separate category, for there must be an element of dramatization in any autobiography; without this it would be very boring. The autobiographer sees his past life in terms of characters, situations and settings which he dramatizes to a greater or lesser extent. The very act of setting out to do this implies a degree of self-dramatization. If the identity of the dramatic autobiographer is a mystery, it is no less so in the other two categories. In the "oratorical" mode it may be hard to find the real man who hides behind the public deeds or rhetoric; in the "poetic" mode he may be even more elusive as he is, apparently, a maverick. Howarth's assertion that, in the case of Autobiography as Poetry, the hero of the book is its reader, because only he can "provide the missing continuity", is a misleading generalisation which could be applied to any autobiography. The reader always has the last word; this does not mean that he can necessarily "master" the "final form" of the book, but in every case he will be left with his own interpretation, which may be different from that of the author himself.

Richard Coe offers a new and original division reflecting contemporary usage - "pop" and "non-pop" autobiography. He says that "like pop music, the pop Childhood appears to be aimed primarily at a teenage or non-intellectual market". (9) In his footnote to this he defines the sub-genre further as "preshaped for a subsequent circulating library, hardback market, with a readership guaranteed in advance through the publicity of the periodicals", adding, "Perhaps the classic instance of this type of Childhood best-seller is Laurie Lee's Cider with Rosie". (10) In the light of Lee's own account of the writing of Cider with Rosie (11) and Brian Finney's analysis of the work, (12) both of which indicate its complexity, this choice seems particularly inappropriate. When a good many excellent contemporary autobiographies have been extremely popular it is difficult to see how Coe equates commercial succes with the "pop" culture at which he patronisingly says it is aimed. It is also difficult to understand whether his choice of works for this section, including those as different from Cider with Rosie as Alison Uttley's The Country Child (1931) and Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House on the Prairie series (1935) is based on intellectual content and appeal, as he seemed to say at

first, or their market value, as he later implies.

However, Coe is right in acknowledging a growth industry in autobiography which is written with the desire to entertain and has wide retail sales' outlets. Like any other kind of autobiography this chosen form will be influenced by earlier or contemporary models in conjunction with the need to achieve a particular effect and appeal. Coe is probably right again when he says that "pop" autobiography "is often the occasion for well-known figures to demystify and democratize their public image by affording glimpses of their pre-affluent selves in those early days before their features had become familiar to millions from the television screens". (13) With the desire to enhance a public image in one way or another, there will also be the unacknowledged financial motive already mentioned in the preceding chapter. Yet the "pop" autobiographer, if he exists, will also have the same deep-seated, half-understood needs as any other autobiographer to trace his path in life, to see where he came from, to make connections and to see where he is now.

These are only some of the possible ways of grouping autobiography; many others could be suggested: for example, theme, country of origin or ethnic background, though none of these will form an exclusive "type". All groupings reflect the specific interests of the person who makes them, so that they are a subjective way of treating what is already a highly subjective genre. They are a convenience for reader and author. Autobiographers are probably aware of the limitations and possibilities of various types, but with unconscious factors always present to influence selectivity the motive for choosing any particular form style or approach may not be "pure". Autobiographers will exploit the mode most suited to their individual needs and purposes, but the intrusion of the unconscious into their work may cause it to stray into other modes. (e.g., pp.25-27: Rowse, 1942; p.36: Mosley, 1968)

Autobiographical groupings are useful as an aid to study, but should not be regarded as self-contained sections into which a work can be slotted without reference to any other groupings within the genre. They are not a way of "pinning down" autobiography.

CHAPTER THREE

TYPES OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY: MOTIVATION, FORM AND STYLE

1 Edwin Muir, An Autobiography, quoted by Peter Abbs in New Pelican Guide to English Literature, vol 8, p.522
2 Abbs, op.cit., p.522
3 J. R. Ackerley, My Father and Myself
4 Waldo H. Dunn, English Biography, quoted by Wayne Shumaker in English Autobiography, its Emergence, Materials and Form, p.53
5 Shumaker, op.cit., p.53
6 William L. Howarth, "Some Principles of Autobiography", in Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical, ed. James Olney, p.94
7 Ibid, p.95
8 Ibid, p.105
9 Richard Coe, When the Grass was Taller, p.289
10 Ibid, p.289
11 Laurie Lee, "Writing Autobiography", in I Can't Stay Long, pp.49-53
12 Brian Finney, The Inner I, pp.125-130
13 Coe, op.cit., p.289

PART II

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF CHILDHOOD

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SPECIAL FEATURES OF THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF CHILDHOOD

To suggest using the age of the protagonist as yet another way of dividing the genre may at first sight seem idiosyncratic, but the autobiography of childhood is now so extensive that it is worthy of separate consideration. Many autobiographers write only of what they see as their childhood, or at least their years of immaturity, and many others devote a whole volume in a multi-volume life to that period. The implication of this is that childhood is seen as a special time, an entity with definite boundaries which can, in retrospect, be redognised and written about. We may ask what prompts these autobiographers to delve back into their memories, often of half a century ago, to the time when they were, by worldly standards, small and insignificant, and also what problems they face in re-creating that time.

The enormous growth of autobiography in general, and that of childhood in particular, in recent years may lead to the suspicion that there is a copy-cat factor at work - the realisation that there is a thriving market for these fascinating stories and the possibility of commercial success. It has already been demonstrated that there is rarely a single, uncomplicated motive for writing autobiography and, if it is present, this mercenary reason will be only one of many. Modern psychology has made it a commonplace that the roots of personality go back into the experiences of childhood, and that to rediscover and examine the past can be therapeutic. Yet the history of the autobiography of childhood goes further back than Freud or Jung. David Vincent (1) shows that humble, often almost illiterate, people were in some way motivated to set down their life stories as far back as the end of the eighteenth century. It is possible that these people found it instinctively beneficial or therapeutic to write about their childhoods, especially as many of them were deeply traumatised by their experiences as child workers.

Some autobiographers give little space to their earlier years, usually because the period does not fit into the general theme, design or message of the book. The necessary selection process has edited it out. Some choose to mention a particular influence connected with later preoccupations: Lord George Brown remembers

seeing Big Ben across the river from his childhood home in south London, an obvious and picturesque link with his political career. (2) Leslie Halliwell writes at some length, not so much of the ordinary experiences of childhood, but of early visits to the cinema which made him so enamoured of that medium that he spent his adult life devoted to it. (3) Barbara Woodhouse, the animal trainer, mentions her childhood very briefly, and then only in relation to animals owned by her family and her growing understanding of them. (4) Oswald Mosley, on the other hand, tells us that he regards his childhood as of "little importance", adding that "Few things are more overrated than the effects of childish experience on later life , . . ".(5) He says that he read the works of psychologists in order to examine his own childhood "in the light of analytical psychology" (6), seeing in it the classic features contributing to later trauma - the broken home, the quarrels, the too-early responsibilites - but lightly dismisses the whole lot as having had no serious influence on his later character:

> The only evident result I will concede at once is really very trivial. I have a tendency to rely on some obliging woman to do small things for me which I feel she can do as well or better than I can, and are a waste of time for me to do; a conceit which obliging women are happily tolerant about. It arises clearly from being the man of the house too soon, and having had a fondly devoted mother, whose help in such respects I repaid from the earliest age by gratuitous advice and virile assertion on every subject under the sun. In general I did not suffer from lack of male influence. (7)

Mosley appears to have had doubts before he came to such a firm conclusion. Rather than just looking back at his childhood to decide what, if anything, had any lasting influence on him, he needed to check with the works of analytical psychologists. His half-humourous deprecation of his early assertiveness and later superiour separation from what he sees as trivial, women's concerns, indicates some over-anxiety that he may, in fact, have been too much under female influence. He appears determined to demonstrate his masculinity and early-acquired independence of mind and opinions. He unconsciously resents the possibility that influences beyond his control may have affected him deeply, so dismisses them as over-rated.

Few autobiographers, however little they write about it, would

go thus far in denying the influence of childhood or relegating it to being a time of little interest to them. Many, indeed, see the role of the child protagonist and his background as of compelling interest, not only to themselves but to others if publication is their intention. Some possible motivation for writing about childhood has already been mentioned in Part I - the desire to speak for the child who was unable to speak for himself; the need to talk out trauma; the desire to recreate or preserve a lost way of life. Coe says that "a Childhood written without a compelling motivation of one kind or another is not likely to be a memorable piece of literature". (8) His own suggestions for motivation are as follows:

1. Nostalgia (9) - which he defines as an attempt to recapture a lost paradise; "sweet regrets"; "black nostalgia" (tinged with bitterness because the writer feels that things were better/cleaner/ kinder in the past. This, he says, forms a protest against the present as well as a defence of the past.)

2. Confession (10) - which he almost immediately rejects as a contemporary motivation because, he says, there is little a child can do that is likely to shock us, so that there is no need for confession.

3. The lament for a lost dimension - the "otherness" of childhood. (11)

4. The search for identity. (12)

5. Exorcism. (13)

The only one of these which is especially applicable to the autobiography of childhood is the third, the lament for a lost dimension. Nostalgia is a sentiment which can be indulged at any age about any time in the past, not only childhood. Confession may also be appropriate at any time of life, and more of a motivation for the autobiographer of childhood than Coe will allow. He is right when he says that an adult nowadays is unlikely to regard anything a child has done as particularly shocking or blameworthy; allowances will be made, sociological and psychological factors taken into account. Nevertheless, the adult autobiographer knows that the child felt guilty, often without understanding why, about some event, and that feeling has persisted. Confession on paper fulfills the function of exorcism, the need to talk out the trauma or guilt and allow the wounds to heal. Dolly Scannell tells of the time when, at seven and a half years old, she was taken from the children's playground by a soldier who attempted to assault and strangle her, and of her feelings

after she was rescued, taken to the police station, examined by a doctor and then returned home:

> I felt so bad for I had made Mother run all the way home on a Saturday after she had carried the heavy shopping bags from Chrisp Street. Why had I been such a coward instead of running away? Father and David were having their dinner. David looked at me as though I was a wicked girl. Father did not look at me at all. (14)

As an adult Mrs. Scannell would know that the child was a victim and had no reason to feel guilty or cowardly, but such feelings are not easily rationalised. The guilt persisted for many years. Much later, when her mother would not let her join the Girl Guides like her sisters, Dolly thought it might be in some way due to the "soldier incident":

> Mother said the guides wouldn't be suitable for me and I felt very sad when my younger sister, Marjorie, was allowed to join. I often wondered if it was the soldier's fault. Mother did worry about me. I wished I had been brave that day, perhaps I would have been a teacher, or at least a guide. (15)

The older Dolly, aged about fourteen when Marjorie joined the Guides, had matured sufficiently to apportion blame to the soldier, but she still shows guilt for not being "brave" at the age of seven. The adult Dolly thinks that the effects of the incident have been so long-lasting as to prevent her becoming a teacher. Writing about it in middle age is the final attempt to exorcise the trauma on behalf of the child who could not convince herself that she had done nothing wrong, and the older child and adult who felt that a blight had been cast over her life by her own infant cowardice.

Coe's fourth category, the search for identity, is universal among autobiographers, not just those of childhood, but his third, the lament for a lost dimension, has special relevance to that period. Coe discusses it at some length in the context of what he describes as "the pure and unsullied religious faith of infancy" (16) which, he says, is gradually lost in adolescence. (17) This conception of childhood as having a dimension which has been lost in later life may be applied equally well to the sense of "magic" and "mystery" which he refers to throughout his book as its special quality. (18) This is the child's sense of wonder, enhanced awareness and imagination - the poetic, barely definable, quality which many autobiographers feel that their early lives possessed. The longing and sadness that the

memory of this evokes, often combined with flashes of joy shared with the child protagonist, brings it very close to nostalgia, yet there are also indications of an extra, lost dimension. Much of this quality of "otherness", "mystery" or "magic" - however one may choose to define it - is due to the ambivalence caused by the child's inexperience allied to his acute perception and receptivity. His limited knowledge of life and scientific facts may give him an inadequate grasp of reality, or the relation of one thing to another, so that, untrammelled by reality, the child's imagination has full scope to run riot. As worldly knowledge is gradually acquired more and more things are explained and understood, so that there is less to wonder at, fewer "first times", less to fear. Occupations and games which were all-absorbing for a short while pall or are outgrown as other interests take their place. This can cause great sadness and the feeling that something has been "lost". Rosemary Sutcliff tells of a make-believe game she used to play with her friend:

> Jean and I had, as I think a great many best friends have, a secret make-believe world of our own. We had only to say, 'Let's be Lilian and Diana', and, as though it was a magical formula, step straight into a world that was as real to us as the world of school and parents and cornflakes for breakfast . . .
>
> In the summer after my father retired, Jean came to stay with me in North Devon. On the first morning, we retired to the rustic summer-house. 'Let's be Lilian and Diana . . .'
>
> But the magic formula no longer worked. We tried and tried; but one could only act Lilian and Diana; we could not be them any more. I suppose the break had been too long, and we were just too old. We went on trying for days, searching for the way in. But it was like searching for the lost door to a lost country. Finally, without anything actually being said between us, we gave up and turned to other things. But with Lilian and Diana, something of Jean and Rosemary had gone too; left behind the lost door to the lost country. It was one of the saddest experience of my young life. (19)

The analogy of the "lost door to a lost country" conveys the feelings of bafflement, disappointment and exclusion that the child experiences when it finds that something, inexplicably, is "not the same" any more. Usually the feelings soon pass as other interests take over. The child often dismisses the whole thing by saying casually that it has "gone off" something or someone, but the adult autobiographer tries to recapture the pleasures that meant so much, and to explain their passing. As Rosemary Sutcliff says, "the break had been too

long, and we were just too old". This explains the passing, but not the phenomena of the spontaneity, uninhibited exuberance and heightened imagination of early childhood. This is the "magic" that defies explanation and which so many autobiographers recognise in their own childhoods.

Coe finds other features of the autobiography of childhood so distinctive that he suggests that it is a genre in its own right. This is debatable. He says of the autobiographer of adult life:

> Accuracy is his taskmaster; he is a responsible adult writing for other responsible adults about yet a third responsible adult: himself. Writer, reader and subject share a common code, live in an identical dimension of rationality and understanding. What is significant to the one will normally be significant to the others. Between Self and Others there is no necessary barrier, beyond the inevitable obstacle of language. (20)

There is much here that is open to doubt, and much that is sweeping generalisation. Accuracy in autobiography is a foggy area about which no one can be dogmatic; even when an autobiographer attempts to stick to the truth of events his memory may play him false. Many do not consider accuracy of prime consideration, let alone a taskmaster. Dr. Brian Finney's study of Frank Harris' My Life and Loves, for example, provides a good instance of this. (21) The assertion that writers, readers or protagonists are necessarily responsible people, whatever that may imply, is again debatable. So, too, is the further assertion that they all share "a common code" and live in a dimension where all things are mutually significant with no barriers but that of language - surely an enormous potential barrier in itself. Of the autobiography of childhood (which he refers to as "the Childhood") Coe goes on to say:

> By contrast, in the Childhood, there is no such common ground of automatically shared preconceptions and presuppositions. The former self-as-child is as alien to the adult writer as to the adult reader. The child sees differently, reasons differently, reacts differently. An alternative world has to be created and made convincing. (22)

Coe's own research shows that there is considerable common ground in the experiences of childhood. The child protagonist will not seem alien to the reader who has had similar experiences or feelings. On the contrary, there will be many times when the child will seem to him to be "Just like I was". There may be times when the child

protagonist seems unfamiliar to the autobiographer himself, especially in the very early stages which are beyond normal memory. Familiarity grows with the intensive study and recreation of the personal past that is necessary for autobiography, and there is no indication that the child is alien to his creator. Many seem to feel a strong affinity and emotional involvement with this former self, however odd and unaccountable his actions may appear to the adult mind.

Although Coe's arguments do not justify his claims for the existence of a separate genre, there are ways in which the autobiography of childhood differs from that of adulthood, having its own special features and difficulties. Coe rightly points out that "The Childhood is not just a 'standard' autobiography which has failed or else been left because the writer has run out of time, enthusiasm or inspiration". (23) Far from being incomplete, the story of childhood is usually presented as a self-contained entity with a definite beginning, middle and end. Childhood begins with "I was born . . .", but the beginning of adult life is indeterminate and not fixed at specific dates, and its ending is unknown. Many older people in the childhood story will be long dead when it is written; this adds to the sense of completeness because their lives can be seen as a whole and form an enclosed area within the story, frequently marking highlights in the protagonist's own life. Far from being a failure, the autobiography of childhood has become an enormous success, both aesthetically and commercially. In multi-volume autobiographies those describing the early years often have an endearing quality which is lacking in those dealing with adult years. Molly Weir's story of her Glasgow childhood is delightful, but her later volumes, dealing as they do with endless anecdotes of "ITMA" and "Life With the Lyons" (24), are no more than mildly interesting. The indefinable magic has gone.

The purposes of writing autobiography seem to differ little whatever the age of the protagonist, but the period of childhood does present its own difficulties. The purpose can only come from the adult, who looks back at a very distant version of himself. This is difficult at any age, but the self of, say, twenty-five, had a certain degree of maturity, used adult language and understood

much of the world around him. The child did not. Coe is right when he says that the child sees, reasons and reacts differently from the adult. (25) Whatever the child protagonist said, did, understood, thought or felt must be re-interpreted by the adult autobiographer who talks, acts, understands, thinks and feels differently. The experience was the child's, but the interpretation is the adult's. He must do his best to enter the child's mind and write from within him, whilst at the same time creating a piece of literature. The naiveté of a small child is difficult to interpret and often appears ridiculous, but the autobiographer must try to show how and why things appeared as they did to the child's immature mind and not descend to whimsy or jokes to the audience at his expense. Gwen Raverat sails perilously close to the wind when she writes about her early fear of the tigers which she thought lurked on the top of old-fashioned bed-canopies:

> That was where the tigers lived. I never actually saw one myself, but that only made it the more frightening. This was one of the reasons why I never liked sleeping in my mother's room. Fortunately, ordinary beds for children no longer had any curtains at all, so that the night-nursery was quite safe. The tigers can't have been very comfortable on the canopies, which were only about a yard across, but that was their own business. One really must not start being sentimental about tigers. (26)

The first three sentences capture the spirit of the bizarre fear of what lies in dark or hidden places experienced by many children. The fourth expresses the simple logic with which children try to cope with such situations - no curtains, therefore no tigers. From then on the adult is laughing at the child and inviting her readers to do the same. Laughter can diffuse a frightening situation, but for the child tigers on the bed canopy are no laughing matter - they are <u>real</u>. The drawing which faces the quotation, showing the actual tiger on the canopy with the infant Gwen cowering in her bed below, <u>is</u>, one must admit, amusing, but it does not seem quite fair to laugh at a genuinely frightened child.

Laurie Lee treats his protagonist more sensitively in the classic opening to <u>Cider with Rosie</u>:

> I was set down from the carrier's cart at the age of three; and there with a sense of bewilderment and terror my life in the village began.

> The June grass, amongst which I stood, was taller than I was, and I wept. I had never been so close to grass before. It towered above me and all around me, each blade tattoed with tiger-skins of sunlight. It was knife-edged, dark and a wicked green, thick as a forest and alive with grasshoppers that chirped and chattered and leapt through the air like monkeys. (27)

This passage is meant to be amusing, yet there is no hint of patronage, nor any suggestion that the child may have been rather silly to be frightened of being alone in the long grass. Lee first tells the reader that the child felt "bewilderment and terror". Then he tells us why - because he had "never been so close to grass before". At this point we know that there was really nothing to be frightened about, but when he goes on to use metaphors of tattoos and tiger-skins to describe the grass we begin to see why the child was frightened. A young child does not think in metaphors, but by using images that would cause most adults to tremble - dangerous wild animals, metallic sharpness, darkness, strange noises and movements in an isolated and alien environment - the child's fear finds sympathetic chords in the adult's mind. It seems eminently reasonable that one so small in relation to his surroundings should see the world in that way. We can sympathise with his fear and share his relief when his ever-loving sisters come to his rescue.

This same lack of experience and worldly knowledge which gives rise to so many strange beliefs and irrational fears often makes the child extremely credulous, especially of things which trusted adults tell him. Rosemary Sutcliff believed her mother's story that she had been intended for the family next door, but that the stork had lost his way in a snowstorm and delivered her to the wrong house to be taken in just for the night. She says, "I never thought to wonder why, if the story were true, I had not merely been handed over the garden fence to my rightful owners next morning". (28) But this is the strange way in which a child's mind works and must be respected by autobiographers.

Credulity is one of the factors that lead to so much misplaced loyalty in childhood. The adult's developed critical judgement looks back at a child whose sense of loyalty and justice is emotional rather than logical. A child will often be "for" a favoured or strongly influential parent, and "against" another parent

or relative in a family dispute, without knowing or understanding the facts on either side. Robert Roberts' lack of sympathy towards his father has already been cited as an example of this (29) though in his case his bias lasted into adult life. The autobiographer is free to offer alternative viewpoints which may later be available to him, but they must be <u>seen</u> to come from his mouth and not that of his protagonist. The child may only show the outlook and feelings that he had at the time when particular events occurred, and these will reflect his limited knowledge and experience. The autobiographer must not allow the child to be wise beyond his years, offering explanations of which he would have been incapable, or facts which he was in no position to know or understand - although of course the adult autobiographer is allowed to comment as narrator on the child protagonist's behaviour.

The subject matter of the autobiography of the child and the adult will naturally be different, but there will be much common ground within each group. Adults marry, have children, develop their careers, and so on. Children experience parents or guardians, siblings, relations, play, school and a host of events connected with all these things. The finite nature of some of these experiences adds to the sense of completeness that autobiographers find in childhood remembered. Childish play is outgrown; school ends at some time in the teens; older relations die; ties with siblings and parents weaken. The ambivalence of the "end" of childhood will be discussed in the final chapter of this thesis, but this <u>apparent</u>, retrospective completeness, with its beginning, middle and end, offers enormous dramatic possibilites which the experienced writer will not be slow to exploit to the full. There is often a tendency to over-dramatise, over-idealise, over-sympathise and over-organise in order to achieve the satisfactory completeness of a story. Life may not have been as idyllic as it may appear to the care-burdened adult; people and events may not have been quite so bizarre or eccentric; the child may not have been quite so unhappy; events may not have dovetailed together quite as neatly as the autobiographer would have us believe. This is part of the necessary process of selection and the carrying out of intention. If the autobiographer aims for pathos, the child's troubles will be highlighted; if he aims

to amuse, he will find innumerable eccentric relation to write about. Within these accepted conventions - that childhood autobiography is an entity, and that considerable licence is allowed in the interpretation of childhood experience - that autobiographer must try to do his best to reconcile truthfulness with art.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SPECIAL FEATURES OF THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF CHILDHOOD

1 David Vincent, Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: a Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography
2 George Brown, In My Way: the Political Memoirs of Lord George Brown, p.23
3 Leslie Halliwell, Seats in All Parts
4 Barbara Woodhouse, Talking to Animals
5 Oswald Mosley, My Life, p.6
6 Ibid, p.21
7 Ibid, p.21
8 Richard Coe, When the Grass was Taller, p.62
9 Ibid, pp.62-67
10 Ibid, p.73
11 Ibid, p.75
12 Ibid, p.75
13 Ibid, p.75
14 Dolly Scannell, Mother Knew Best, p.75
15 Ibid, p.91
16 Coe, op.cit., pp.42-51
17 Ibid, p.43
18 Ibid, pp.102-103
19 Rosemary Sutcliff, Blue Remembered Hills, pp.70-71
20 Coe, op.cit., p.1
21 Brian Finney, The Inner I, pp.47-60
22 Coe, op.cit., p.1
23 Ibid, p.1
24 Molly Weir, e.g., Stepping Into the Spotlight, Walking Into the Lyons' Den
25 Coe, op.cit., p.1
26 Gwen Raverat, Period Piece, p.162
27 Laurie Lee, Cider With Rosie, p.9
28 Sutcliff, op.cit., p.7
29 Robert Roberts, A Ragged Schooling, p.10

CHAPTER FIVE

THE "BEGINNING" - THE IMPORTANCE OF OPENING CHAPTERS IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

In his table of analysis of the age in which a selection of people had published their autobiographies, A. O. J. Cockshut found that the youngest (Ronald Knox) was thirty and the oldest (Bertrand Russell) ninety-seven.(1) These two are exceptions, and the average in Cockshut's selection is in the fities and sixties age group. For those who try to write about their lives from the earliest times they can remember, the gap between events and their recreation is very long, and will present yet another difficulty for the autobiographer of childhood. He must rely on recollections of a time when his perceptions were likely to be distorted by the inexperience and fevered imagination of childhood, and these recollections in turn will be subject to the fickleness of memory itself. In adult life it may be possible to check the veracity of memories, at least in a factual way, from diaries and other contemporary records, but few children keep diaries of any but the most ephemeral sort. The records of others who were grown up when the autobiographer was a child may provide useful confirmation of dates, places and events, but when it comes to more personal issues, such as feelings and reactions to these events, they will represent the subjective views of the chronicler, not the child protagonist. By the age of fifty or sixty, childhood usually exists only as a reconstruction in the memory of the adult concerned. There will be few people living who knew him as a child; friends may have lost touch, parents and older relations died; places and buildings that he knew may have been changed beyond recognition, so that there is little to jog his memory. How much can the autobiographer honestly claim to remember from such a time, so long ago?

There is considerable controversy about the age at which memory begins. Hypnotists claim to be able to take people's memories back to the pre-natal period and the process of being born - life's first trauma. Other authorities doubt if memory extends even into the pre-linguistic period.(2), though any mother knows that a baby understands speech long before it can practice it, and can remember things for a comparatively short time. If the baby's memory is not reinforced by repetition - seeing a particular person

regularly, visiting a place again - it soon fades and is lost forever. Freud finds this loss of early memory an enigma. He points out that although the first few years of life are a time of great physical and intellectual achievement, when the baby or child is learning new things daily with great rapidity, very little memory of this period remains. He suggests that there is a process of displacement at work which he describes as "screening"; the early memories are "screened" by later ones, which will either be revisions of them or symbols for them. He admits that, even under analysis, there is no guarantee of the accuracy of either screened or subsequent memories, but asserts that they are, nevertheless, significant for our understanding of both childhood and later years. (3)

If an expert analyst cannot guarantee the accuracy of screened or subsequent memories, it seems unlikely that the autobiographer will be able to do so, even if he is aware of these concepts. We may ask whether these doubtful memories, which may be displacements or symbols according to Freud, have any valid place in autobiography, or whether they are of mere curiosity value. Are the apparently trivial, random fragments which so many autobiographers offer significant in relation to their later lives or to the structure of their autobiographies? At times one suspects that there is an unofficial league table to see who can remember furthest back, but rather than dismiss them out of hand it may be instructive to examine one or two early memories more closely.

A. L. Rowse thinks he remembers sitting in a baby's high chair at about three years of age, though he admits this may have been a dream. (4) At first sight this seems to be so trivial and uncertain as to be hardly worth mentioning, but Rowse goes on to describe what he says is a definite and detailed memory from about the same age. Unknown to his family, he went off for a walk by himself into town. This indicates an independent, confident child, a description endorsed by the author when he describes himself as a very "forward" child, physically and mentally. (5) Three years old, or even rather less, is late for a child to be using a high chair, and an independent child would naturally resent being confined to one whilst the rest of the family were seated at the table. Rowse tells us that he later became a timid child. (6) Following Freud's theory, the

early assertiveness and resentment of being treated like a baby may have been screened by the later disposition to timidity, so that the picture of the child in the high chair is significant of an emotion strongly felt at the time.

Rosemary Sutcliff remembers a visit to a zoo when she was about eighteen months old:

> I did not so much mind the pheasants, but there was another cage holding captive a restless revolving red squirrel, at sight of which all the woes of the world, all sins and sorrow, all injustice, all man's inhumanity to man came crashing in one great engulfing wave over my eighteen-month-old head, which was not yet ready to cope with it. I took one look, and broke into a roar of grief and fury which nothing would console or quieten, until I had been smartly trundled out of the gardens. (7)

The validity of such an early memory is doubtful, and the interpretation is clearly either that of the adult or deliberate hyperbole. The idea of all the troubles of the world sweeping over such a tiny child is absurd if regarded as a literal statement. However, the symbolic significance of the supposed event becomes apparent in the next few sentences:

> It is, in fact, my only memory of the time before I contracted juvenile arthritis. Because my next memory, which must date from a year later, is of being ill in bed with pains in my joints . . . (8)

The arthritis was to become a "cage" which was as frustrating to her as the squirrel's was to him; whether the earlier incident was truly remembered, embellished from hearsay or imaginary, its psychological importance as a symbol makes it an appropriate opening to the story.

Virginia Woolf takes an analytical view of one of her earliest memories: she speaks first of remembering her mother on a journey wearing a flowered dress, then continues:

> Perhaps we were going to St. Ives; more probably, for from the light it must have been evening, we were coming back to London. But it is more convenient artistically to suppose that we were going to St. Ives, for that will lead to my other memory, which also seems to be my first memory, and in fact is the most important of all my memories. If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills - then my bowl, without a doubt, stands upon this memory. It is of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed in the nursery at St. Ives. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and

> sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking, one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind. It is of hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive. (9)

This passage gives us information about the author's early memories and also shows how she makes use of them. She admits that the family may have been returning to London, but "finds it more convenient artistically" to have them on the way to St. Ives. By doing this she can connect the memory of the flowered dress with the feeling of ecstasy on hearing the waves. This makes for a better story; having <u>two</u> early memories from the same holiday gives a little more solidity to the dark areas of early childhood than having only one, or two disconnected ones. She casts doubt on the "ecstasy" memory being her very first by saying that is <u>seems</u> to be so, but expresses no doubt about its being "the most important of all my memories". She has begun to realise that she is structuring her autobiography with more regard for aesthetic and symbolic truth than factual truth. As a "base" upon which her life stand, this early aesthetic experience is of paramount importance in <u>itself</u>, regardless of exact chronology.

Virginia Woolf's memory of early ecstasy is an indication of her developing awareness of herself as an individual, having a unique experience in response to the world around her. Such development is gradual, but many autobiographers recognise a sudden shock as a milestone which marks, in retrospect, a transition. In Woolf's case it was a pleasant shock, resulting in overwhelming, if brief, happiness; in many other cases autobiographers see their first memory as one of pain. The realisation comes, suddenly, that the protagonist is a separate being, and so are others whom he had formerly regarded as willing extensions of himself. This, in turn, leads to the awareness of vulnerability and the knowledge that the world is not always a comfortable or happy place. The shock can be of the most natural and predictable kind - the birth of a sibling. Dolly Scannell remembers being taken out for a walk by her elder sister when she would have preferred to stay at home with her mother. On returning home, her sister told her, "Mother has something to show you". She continues:

> I remember climbing the little wooden stairs. The evening sun was making strange shadows on the walls through the trees, and in Mother's bedroom the counterpane was white - it was her best one. She was in bed although it wasn't bedtime and lying on her neck and sucking it was a baby. Mother looked pleased but somehow guilty and defiant, and I came out straight away without saying anything. (10)

This is an ordinary enough memory, and Mrs. Scannell's autobiography is a homely tale, yet the incident suggests the first feeling of being "left out" that persisted throughout her childhood. In addition to this, although Dolly herself cannot remember being jealous of her new sister, Marjorie, her many older sisters told her that she was. Marjorie was apparently a very lovable child, whereas Dolly herself became sullen and sickly and very dependent on her younger sister. The jealousy was repressed under genuine affection and dependence ("screened", according to Freud) but the initial shock of jealous feeling remains and is used as a key to the autobiography.

Unlike Virginia Woolf, Dolly Scannell may not be aware that she is making connections, but there are many autobiographers who deliberately highlight an early memory which reflects the theme of the book. Molly Weir recalls an incident when she was about three years old, and returning home late with her parents:

> "Give her a carry," my mother's voice said. "She's only a baby." "She can walk," came the man's voice. "There's nothing wrong with her legs." There was no spoiling for me. (11)

Molly Weir's autobiography is about "standing on her own feet", making her way in life by herself; her very titles emphasise this. (12) The paradigm is obvious and intentional.

Catherine Cookson mentions several early memories which foreshadow the threads of violence and drunkenness that run through her autobiography, but it begins with the greatest trauma of her life - an allusion to her illegitimacy and the stigma it gave her:

> "Now you're married I wish you joy, First a girl and then a boy". That was all right; I liked that part because I wanted first a girl and then a boy. But above all things I wanted to get married. It was nothing to do with having a husband, nothing at all, I just wanted to be called Mrs., because our Kate wasn't called Mrs. (13)

Many women autobiographers will remember the skipping rhyme that opens the quotation; some might find it useful material for a chapter on childhood games, but Catherine Cookson uses it as an introduction

to the misery that she and her mother shared. It also illustrates her protagonist's bewilderment. The child realises that there is something wrong about having a mother who is not "Mrs.", but cannot understand why this is so. As children whose mothers are called "Mrs." do not appear to have this "wrong" thing, childish logic assumes that just being "Mrs." makes everything all right; marriage will bring the wished-for joy. By referring to her mother as "our Kate", the author suggests their ambiguous relationship, for it is some years before she realises that Kate is, in fact, her mother, or the true nature of their mutual "shame".

Janet Hitchman also uses a rhyme game as a symbol for her life:

> Oh will you surrender, oh will you surrender
> The King of the Barbareens?
> We won't surrender, we won't surrender
> The King of the Barbareens. (14)

She goes on to say:

> Now I am forty, and I know that the game remembered some long-dead barbarian king . . . However the game originated, its call to surrender, and its defiance has become to me symbolical, for all my life I have had to fight the barbarians within me, and without. (15)

We are not meant to assume that Janet Hitchman had such thought when she was a child, playing that game at about four years old. The symbolic meaning has been attached to the memory by the mature autobiographer, who sees in it an appropriate opening for her story. She has earlier memories which are, apparently, fragmentary and meaningless. They too have a necessary place at the beginning of her autobiography as they are all she has of the period before she was placed with foster parents at about three years old. Knowing little of her dead parents except their names, and with official records destroyed and the people who might have been able to tell her something also dead, she desperately records the tiniest details she can recall in the hope of finding some roots by which to anchor her unstable childhood. There is always the hope that, some day, the fragments may fit together and make sense.

Although early memories are so frequently important symbols, not all autobiographers use them to begin their stories. Many, although it subsequently becomes apparent that they can remember very early childhood, choose a much later age as a starting point.

It has already been noted that the need to re-live trauma is a motivation for writing autobiography; many autobiographers use the onset of this trauma as an appropriate beginning. This is dramatically effective and cuts out fragmentary details of earlier life which might hold up the story and detract from the main theme. The published autobiography is, after all, intended to entertain, instruct or plead, and a mere chronological, self-indulgent, list of things remembered would be unlikely to do any of these. These later beginnings often represent a turning point in the life of the child or his family. Up to this point the child's life may have been fairly uneventful, happy and secure but suddenly, for no reason that he can understand, things change. He may realise for the first time how dependent he is upon the imperfect world of adults - financially, emotionally and socially. The emotions roused in such a child vary from despair to resentment or resignation, marking a "beginning" he could well have done without.

Philip Oakes' father died when he was four years old, and his mother was an invalid. He does not begin his autobiography with these early details, but with a description of the uniform he wore when he was about eight years old and had been sent away to school much against his will. This antiquated garb is a legacy from the school's founding almost a century earlier - moleskin trousers, starched cravat, blue serge cloak and grey stockings. His resentment at being sent away is greatly increased by being made to wear such garments. He says, "I wished passionately not to be different, but the uniform promised to set me apart". (16) Philip feels further set apart from his fellows when he arrives at the school and reads the legend, "The Royal Orphanage School" on the notice board by the gate. He says. "I read the words again and again but they made no sense. Something was wrong, I thought. There had been a terrible mistake. No one before had ever told me that I was an orphan". (17) Throughout Oakes' early life his battles with his mother over not being allowed any "say" in what happens to him recur constantly; the uniform is only the outward symbol of this resentment which permeates their whole relationship. What happened before he was sent away is included only briefly, but forms a contrast between "then" and "now"; a golden age before he realised his own helplessness, was

treated as though he had no will of his own and was made to feel "different".

The golden age also ended abruptly for Helen Forrester and her family when their father went bankrupt. After a brief introduction describing her return to Liverpool many years later with her son, she begins the main story when she is twelve years old. The family is on Lime Street Station, homeless, penniless, unsuitably clad, waiting for their father (who is almost as helpless as his children) to find them somewhere to live. This sudden transition from "weal to woe" marks the beginning of years of poverty and deprivation which were more "real" and influential in Helen's life than the happy, comfortable years which preceded them on the other side of the Mersey. Thus the arrival at Lime Street Station, the entrance to this new and terrifying world, is made to seem an appropriate beginning for the autobiography. (18)

The autobiographies mentioned so far begin with early memories - or what the authors take to be early memories. Early memories show part of early life, but early life encompasses the whole of the child's existence, not just the parts he remembers. Much of it will have been forgotten, and much may have gone on around him of which he was unaware, even though it may have affected his life. Early memories are so fragmentary that it is often necessary to fill in some of the gaps to form a coherent story - both for the autobiographer's personal satisfaction and to meet the requirements of a commercial venture. Autobiographers gather this background information to their early lives from the memories of others and by documentary research, using the resultant information selectively to suit individual purpose and intention. Information from other people will be as subjective as the autobiographer's own memories, but can be used to offer an interesting contrast of views. The contrasting views of Ronald Fraser's father, for example, reinforce his own muddled state about his childhood relationships. (19) The autobiographer can play safe, using the "my mother told me" approach, which commits him to nothing. He is not saying whether his mother was right or wrong, and no opposing view is presented; it is purely received information, which he finds it convenient to use.

Elizabeth Wilson makes more imaginative use of received or

researched information about her earliest years:

> I was born in the year of the Abdication. Women in white with sculptured hair and men in tuxedos danced the tango on an ocean-going liner. The labels on my mother's luggage forever after said: P. & O. - Not Wanted on Voyage - Cabin - State Room. (20)

Obviously Miss Wilson does not claim to remember what was going on in the year she was born. Her mother may have told her that she went on a cruise that year; she may have described what she wore, how she passed the time. Alternatively, the author may have seen photographs which would show the clothes and hair styles and discovered for herself which dances were fashionable at the time. As the labels remained permanently on her mother's luggage she would probably have noticed them as a child, been curious, and asked what they meant. Why give us this information? Do we need to know what people on liners were wearing in the year of the author's birth? Why not say, simply, "I was born in 1936"? The importance of this background information becomes clear as we read on: "I was born into a section of the middle-class that was shortly to become extinct . . ." (21) She has now begun to "place" herself in the reader's mind by a series of carefully contrived associations. The Abdication itself, although it cannot have had any effect on her own life, represented a shock to the continuity of tradition. The late 1930s bring to most people's minds the threat of Hitler's activities and the growing tide of fascism. We see from the mention of the cruise and the luggage that the author's family were wealthy and leisured, but then learn that she was born into a class that was to become "extinct" , so the happy, carefree situation cannot last. Thus prepared, it is no surprise to find the the author's life was one far removed from the class which could afford trips on ocean-going liners, beautiful clothes and dancing the night away. The autobiography as a whole shows how she escaped from the legacy of being born into this class, whose way of life may have become extinct through lack of money, but whose values lingered on. A stereotyped conformity was expected which Elizabeth Wilson was not prepared to accept. The autobiography is so carefully structured and full of symbols that we may interpret further meanings in the passage quoted. The "sculptured hair", with its rigidly artificial appearance of waves or curls, may be a symbol for the rigidity of middle-class

ideas before the great changes of the late thirties; the "luggage", with its "Not Wanted on Voyage" labels, may represent the author's feeling that she was loaded with social "luggage" and expectations that she did not want to encumber her life's voyage.

Some autobiographies begin, not with early memories, nor with a traumatic event, nor with researched information about early life, but with an account of the lives of parents or other relations. Most people are interested in their origins; parents are important, even to orphans, and it would be a strange and isolated protagonist who did not allow them to appear in his story. (There will be a discussion of parent/child relationships in the next chapter). Sometimes, however, this researched information takes up a disproportionately large section of the book, perhaps several chapters, not necessarily making any direct contribution to the immediate story.

A. L. Rowse begins his autobiography with well-documented material about life and customs in his native Cornish village, as we might expect from one whose aim is partly to write social history. He tells us that much of the material for this came from a note-book he kept of his father's stories and memories, his own schoolboy diaries and his mother's excellent memory. He does not reach his own early memories until well into the fourth chapter. At one time, he tells us, he had the idea that he would write his father's life - "a life without interest, without incident, but of which that would be the point - the life of a plain working man". (22) This is not the place to comment on Rowse's subjective view of the quality of someone else's life, but in using his father's memories of village life and customs, his experience of education and family life as the opening of his own autobiography Rowse has, in a small way, contributed to this unwritten biography and redeemed what he apparently regards as the futility of his father's life.

On the first page of her autobiography Patricia Beer tells us: "I was brought up by my mother to think of Torquay as the home of both goodness and civilisation". (23) The very title of the auto-biography, Mrs. Beer's House, suggests that "mother" is firmly in charge of the household and is likely to feature strongly in the story. Subsequent chapters show that Mrs. Beer had a firm answer, through her adherence to the doctrines of the Plymouth Brethren,

and from personal ambition for her children, to all moral and social questions. The implication of Patricia Beer's ironic tone is that although her mother brought her up to think of Torquay as a symbol of perfection she later came to doubt this. We may, rightly, expect the book to be about "upbringing", and how the author came to question what she had been taught. On the same page the author makes clear the relative positions of her parents in the household. She tells us that she and her sister were taken off to Torquay by their mother for all school holidays, leaving their father on his own in Exmouth. The eventual return home was no happy reunion, for Mrs. Beer was so disconsolate at leaving Torquay that she greeted her husband with acrimony "which lasted in its outspoken form for the whole of the first evening". (24) On this first page the scene is set for the rest of the autobiography - the dominant mother, the "weak" father who was used as a scapegoat for her frustrated ambition, the carefully brought up girls who rarely doubted their mother's rightness or dared disobey her. The early chapters are concerned with family history, especially that of the mother, and also with the backbone of her life, the Plymouth Brethren. The beliefs of such a dogmatic sect are so all-pervasive that it is necessary for Patricia Beer to explain them to the reader before the lives of its adherents can be understood. Mrs. Beer's life was totally influenced by her religion, her frustrated personal ambition and her ambition for her daughters. These factors were, in turn, the strongest influences on Patricia Beer's upbringing and it is appropriate that she includes them all in the scene-setting process of the early chapters.

The use of historical information as the beginning of an autobiography is carried to extremes by Eleanor Farjeon in A Nursery in the Nineties, where she devotes almost two hundred pages to the lives of her parents before embarking on her own story. Both Patricia Beer and A. L. Rowse allow fragments of information about their own lives to filter into their accounts of their elders, thus gradually establishing the protagonist's place in the corporate identity of the family, but Eleanor Farjeon allows herself very little place in almost half her autobiography. When she does refer to herself in these chapters it is usually in the third person. Of her own birth she says:

> Little Charlie was not eleven months old when a girl, a Sunday-child, arrived . . . She was registered, not "Ellen", but "Eleanor", and during childhood was never called anything but Nellie, Nelly, or Nell. (25)

This has the effect of making her a very minor character in the autobiography at this stage. One might doubt whether the book is really an autobiography at all, when its subject is pushed to the background for so long, but the author gives convincing reasons for this elongated preface to her own life:

> I pine for my childhood, and the childhood of my brothers. But when feeling takes a flow-back into the past, thinly washing shores I cannot walk again, it is a childhood I never lived I long for most: the youth of my Mother, lovely Margaret Jefferson. (26)

Most autobiographers look back upon childhood with various mixtures of nostalgia, regret and resentment, but here is one who pines for that time. She then goes on to say that she wishes she could re-live her mother's childhood! The complex reasons for this become clearer as the autobiography proceeds. Mrs. Farjeon ("Maggie") was, according to her daughter, a very self-contained woman; Eleanor says that she "gave you only what she chose of herself". (27) She later thinks that her father may have felt this lack of knowledge of "the veiled life of the beloved, of whom we both desired something she would not bestow" (28) as much as she herself did. Had the author not told us this we would not have guessed it from the content of the autobiography, where the picture is of a close and happy family. Once again, the complexities of motivation and intention arise - the autobiography may be an attempt to redress the balance, to bridge the gaps that the author admits existed between herself and her mother, and her father and his wife.

Another possible reason for Eleanor's wish to "be" her mother is envy. Although the photographs in the book belie it, Eleanor describes herself as a plain, gauche and unattractive child. By contrast, her mother is seen by Eleanor as beautiful, elegant, poised and popular - an ideal which Eleanor feels she can never hope to attain. A. L. Rowse attributes his passion for picking the brains of his elders to "nostalgia for these memories which were never mine" (29), but with Eleanor Farjeon the motivations goes much deeper. By "being" Maggie she can experience the ideal that

she felt her mother represented, and she must "live" this part before she can begin her own story. By her frequent use of the present tense she brings the characters to life once more, capturing Maggie on paper as she never could in reality.

She says that it is easy to identify with her father because they were alike in temperament, and his story is easy to tell because he left copious memorabilia. In spite of this there are indications in the autobiography that there was a gap in the father-daughter relationship which needs to be filled before Eleanor can tell her own story. First she must "find" the father who may have been more elusive than she admits. The middle-class Victorian nursery was typically set apart from the everyday lives of the parents, forming an enclosed little world. The Farjeon children were all highly imaginative and emotional and lived in a strange fantasy world that separated them even more from their parents and the world outside. (30) Mr. Farjeon was of a volatile and irritable temperament, and this may have made him somewhat inaccessible to his children despite his obvious affection for them. In addition, the strongest male influence on Eleanor's childhood appears to have been her brother Harry, not her father. The nursery fantasy game consisted mainly of "being" other people; it seems that Eleanor needed to "be" both her father and her mother, creating mutual bonds of being, before she could write about and understand her own life.

These examples show some of the ways in which the beginning of autobiography is structured in relation to the autobiographer's early life and early memories. Most autobiographers probably use a combination of memory, hearsay and research to build up a convincing picture of their earliest years, or those of their parents if that is how they wish to begin the story. Selection for this purpose is not random; even the most fragmentary early memories often take on symbolic significance when seen in the full context of the autobiography. Sometimes they are consciously used in this way, at other times the unconscious prompts their recall and use. The phenomenon is not confined to sophisticated writers such as Virginia Woolf, who shows us the thought-processes involved in finding a suitable opening, but is also adopted by humbler autobiographers, often writing a first book, who, by instinct or design, find a starting point which is

appropriate to its theme rather than dependent on chronology.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE "BEGINNING" - THE IMPORTANCE OF OPENING CHAPTERS IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

1 A. O. J. Cockshut, The Art of Autobiography in 19th and 20th Century England, unnumbered pages preceding Introduction
2 Richard Coe, When the Grass was Taller, pp.97-103
3 Sigmund Freud, The Psychopathology of Everyday Life, pp.43-47
4 A. L. Rowse, A Cornish Childhood, p.82
5 Ibid, p.82
6 Ibid, p.82
7 Rosemary Sutcliff, Blue Remembered Hills, p.8
8 Ibid, p.8
9 Virginia Woolf, Moments of Being, p.64
10 Dolly Scannell, Mother Knew Best, p.28
11 Molly Weir, Shoes Were for Sunday, p.10
12 Weir, op. cit., also Best Foot Forward, A Toe on the Ladder, et.al.
13 Catherine Cookson, Our Kate, p.10
14 Janet Hitchman, King of the Barbareens, p.7
15 Ibid, pp.7-8
16 Philip Oakes, From the Middle of England, p.11
17 Ibid, p.22
18 Helen Forrester, Twopence to Cross the Mersey
19 Ronald Fraser, In Search of a Past, discussed in Chapter One of this work
20 Elizabeth Wilson, Mirror Writing, p.3
21 Ibid, p.3
22 Rowse, op.cit, p.43
23 Patricia Beer, Mrs. Beer's House, p.1
24 Ibid, p.1
25 Eleanor Farjeon, A Nursery in the Nineties, p.178
26 Ibid, p.11
27 Ibid, p.13
28 Ibid, p.13
29 Rowse, op.cit., p.70
30 Farjeon, op.cit., pp.321-325

CHAPTER SIX

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL USE OF SOME COMMON EXPERIENCES OF CHILDHOOD

The background to childhood described in autobiography falls into a fairly regular pattern. Usually there will be details of everyday life - parents, the family, the household, friends, play, school, locality, the social setting. Many of these background experiences have become almost clichés. The autobiographer brought up in a working-class household in the earlier part of the century will often describe the privations of poverty - hunger, scanty or inappropriate clothing, visits to the pawnbroker, the humiliating processes of charitable relief. There will often be descriptions of primitive plumbing - or life with no plumbing at all. Street games and simple treats will be remembered. The autobiographer who was born into the middle or upper classes will tell of nannies, governesses, servants, holidays and outings, nursery games and parties. He has his own formsof deprivation, notably the horrors of boarding school and lack of parental involvement.

A reader might be forgiven for thinking that if the experiences of childhood are so predictable, to read a few autobiographies would fill in the whole picture and to read more would be repetitious. However, the apparently stereotyped nature of autobiographical accounts of childhood creates a bond of recognition and sympathy between the autobiographer and his reader, who will recognise many events similar to those of his own childhood and relate them to his own development. As for the autobiographer himself, any aspect of this mundane background can be instrumental to his childhood development through its potential for self-discovery. Anything that happens to the child in the home, at school or in the street can lead at one extreme to trauma and limitation and, at the other, to intense pleasure and growth. The autobiographer has the task of combining the use of background with the internal monologue of his developing self in such a way that the result is in harmony with his plan for the autobiography as a whole, and is interesting and satisfying as a work of literature.

The main topics dealt with here will be Parents, Home Life, Education and Locality.

Parents

The child protagonist's relationship with its parents features prominently in most autobiographies of childhood. Ideally parents are expected to provide the child with shelter, clothing, food, education, encouragement and, above all, love and affection. Unfortunately this is all too often not the case. Parents are themselves human and fallible; social, economic and emotional factors will affect their treatment of their children and each other, creating what Coe describes as "a strong emotional imbalance". (1) The naturally ambivalent feelings of a child towards its parents are further complicated by this imbalance, so that the adult autobiographer looks back and finds an alarming mixture of guilt, resentment, love and hate in the relationship. These feelings may exist more in the autobiographer as he is now than they did in the child; a child often accepts a situation as "normal" because it has no standard of comparison, but an adult can, in retrospect, compare that unhappy situation with the ideal or the current norm. The autobiographer who recognises that his relationship with his parents was unsatisfactory needs to examine and try to understand its difficulties in order to come to terms with the past and reconcile it to the present.

Reconciliation often includes a remarkable degree of forgiveness for past wrongs and probably acts as a counterbalance to the autobiographer's feelings of guilt, rejection or disappointment. Feelings may also have been modified by time and the growing understanding of the difficulties of being both an adult and a parent. Allowances are made even for the most dreadful and cruel mothers, such as those of Kathleen Dayus and Kathleen Woodward. Kathleen Dayus attempts to find reasons for her mother's behaviour in social conditions:

> . . . Mum looked older than her years. Today I realise why she was like she was. It must have been a terrible ordeal for her and the rest of the women who had to live in one room and two bedrooms and bring up thirteen or more children. They had no bathrooms, no hot or cold water in the house and had to live on relief when they could get it. These women were tired and worn out when they reached the age of forty. Some never lived to that age; many were claimed by consumption, childbirth or plain hard work. (2)

Later in the autobiography Dayus says: "I was sure she didn't love me, and at times I hated her, although at others I was sorry for her". (3) To feel unloved is painful and destructive to a child's

ego; to hate one's mother is equally damaging. By putting her mother's evil temper and her own unloved state into a social context Dayus takes away some of the painful personal impact - she is not unloved because she is, herself, unloveable, but because a social phenomenon beyond her control causes it to be so.

Kathleen Woodward acknowledges the blighting effect of lack of love and her mother's brutality towards her children, yet offers reasons and excuses for both, as well as amelioration of her mother's character:

> She nursed only one softness in her heart, a tenderness for my father. Him she sustained in body and soul, without being conscious of the sacrifices she made, the giving out; she gave without question . . .
>
> In her anger, which was frequent and violent - for when she touched that extreme verge of tiredness in mind and body and would not give way it seemed to revenge itself and become a fierce anger - she aimed her blows without feeling or restraint. Once she split my head open; and again she threw a fork at me, which dangerously pierced my side . . . She had no love to give us and, thank God, she never pretended what she did not feel. (4)

The picture of the vicious mother is blurred by her tenderness for the frail, invalid father; the implication of the final sentence quoted is that <u>because</u> the mother loved him so much there was no love to spare for the children. This is easier to bear than the idea that one may have been unloveable, or that the mother detested children and had never particularly wanted any - an equally plausible explanation. To excuse her mother's spiteful cruelty she blames tiredness, herself adopting a spirit of acceptance and resignation, saying that she has "never felt a moment of animosity toward her, or been conscious of the suspicion of a feeling of bitterness". (5) This resignation becomes almost self-sacrifice with the Christian symbol of the pierced side, yet the protestations are not entirely convincing when the author remarks, "At home it was always wintry". (6)

These are extreme though not uncommon cases. Against them can be set remarkable mothers, often living in equal poverty, who managed their households better than could be expected in the circumstances and remained loving and caring towards their families. The mothers of Dolly Scannell, Winifred Foley, Molly Weir and Robert Roberts, for example. All such mothers are remembered with devoted admiration

by their children, whose autobiographies often seem to be as much an appreciation of "Mother", "Mam", or "Mum" as the story of their own lives. Such autobiographies are partly written with the desire to recapture the happiness of earlier days and partly as a memorial to the loved parent, whose efforts often went unsung in her lifetime.

Even when a home has been reasonably happy unusual circumstances may cause difficulties in a child-parent relationship at some stage, prompting the autobiographer to look again at the situation. When the child knows that it has been cared for and loved any feelings of resentment over a particular grievance may be accompanied by guilt or regret, or an attempt to take all the blame. Dolly Scannell has been seen to attribute all her later discontents to the "soldier episode" (7) when it is plain to the reader that her otherwise excellent mother was partly the cause because she treated Dolly differently from her sisters. Dolly would never overtly criticise her mother, but there may be some intentional irony in her chosen title - Mother Knew Best.

In spite of a very happy childhood Christopher Milne's relationship with his father became complex as he grew up. For nine years he clung to his nanny, and when she left he clung to his father for a further nine. The affection was deep and genuine. Even teasing at school about his being "Christopher Robin" did not spoil the relationship at the time, though the seeds of resentment may have been sown. In his early twenties, when Christopher was having difficulty in finding his own place in the world, he admits to being jealous of his father's success, saying that it seemed to him then that his father had got where he was by climbing upon his infant shoulders. (8) Thus he has the perplexing task of writing about a little boy who was exceedingly happy, yet feeling that the use made of that happy childhood by his father had the power to make him exceedingly unhappy and mar the relationship. At first he was tempted to confine his autobiography to the happy child, but he realised that this falsified the story and decided to tell of his later feelings in an Epilogue. This more honest approach changes the autobiography from an idealised childhood frolic into a journey towards reconciliation and self-healing.

The lingering feeling of unfair treatment by parents can extend to a resentment of the general situation of the protagonist's life as controlled by the outlook and conditions of those parents. What the protagonist felt about it with its various family, personal and social implications will become a major theme of the autobiography. Robert Roberts, for example, felt that his neighbourhood was "low" (9) and was determined to escape from it. The child's initial lack of a standard of comparison was noted at the beginning of this chapter; the wider world of school, friends and larger horizons changes this. V. S. Pritchett compares his own raffish family with that of his friend Frank, well-educated and cultured, wondering resentfully, "Why wasn't I born into an intellectual family?" (10) An intelligent boy such as A. L. Rowse quickly began to feel resentment of his own family, finding himself so lowly born when ambition ran high. His growing awareness of the differences between his own situation and that of of those more favourably placed made him see the nature of the growing divisions between himself and his family. He remarks bitterly on the family's lack of interest in his scholastic achievements:

> Neither mother nor father was any more interested than they had been before in what I was doing at school. They never asked; they never bothered; I don't think they looked at my report books; I might have been consistently at the bottom of the form for all the notice they took. (11)

By his late teens, when he was working hard to get to university, he admits to "a growing sense of superiority" to add to the resentment, and a feeling of "loathing his lot in having been born into a working-class family". (12) At times his assumption of his own superiority in both intellect and judgement seems like an over-compensation for his earlier disappointment at the lack of interest shown by his family - a constant attempt to reassure himself, or to imply that their interest was not worth much anyway. His autobiography is a way of paying his boyhood self its due recognition.

Home Life

The background material closest to the child's life is usually that of the home. When details of domestic routine are mentioned in autobiography it is often because they no longer represent the norm,

either to the author or to society as a whole. Sometimes they are included as nostalgic trivia, but ordinary events can have special significance for the individual autobiographer. Although similar hardships, inconveniences or pleasures are described by many autobiographers, the significance is different every time.

A common childhood memory is of washing day before the days of hot water on tap and washing machines. This is especially so in working-class autobiography, as middle-class nurseries were removed from any acquaintance with domestic details. It is impossible to imagine Christopher Robin turning the mangle on Mondays. Richard Cobb looks back and asserts that he never saw washing hanging out in Tunbridge Wells, and that "a washing line would have given away too much". (13) This may not be strictly true, but underlines his impression of the town as a secretive and genteel place. Maud Pember Reeves, a member of the Fabian Women's Group studying the conditions of the "respectable poor" in Lambeth from 1901-1913, gives details of how the women managed the difficulties of bathing and washing. (14) Hers is disinterested reporting - autobiographers breathe their own life into the proceedings, using the material to suit the tone of the individual autobiography.

V. S. Pritchett makes a comedy out of washing day at his grandmother's. Normally extremely neat in appearance, she presents a ludicrous figure on Mondays. With the comic exaggeration typical of his autobiography, he calls it "this terrible day" and goes on to tell how his grandmother "pinned a man's cloth cap to her hair, kirtled a rough skirt above her knees, put on a pair of wooden clogs and went out to the scullery to start the great weekly wash . . .". (15) Ever on the alert to make a joke of his grandmother's complacency about her own achievements, he relates her habit of "remarking for her neighbours to hear that her linen was of better quality, better washed, whiter and cleaner than the linen of any other women in the town; that the sight of her washing hanging on the line - where my grandfather had to peg and prop it - would shame the rest of the world and the final ironing be a blow to all rivals". (16)

Molly Weir describes washing clothes as part of the communal

life which was the backbone of her childhood. The wash-house was shared by all twelve families in the tenement. Although washing at night met with some disapproval from the more conventional housewives, to Molly it had an appealingly theatrical air, reflecting the major preoccupation of her later autobiographical volumes. She describes the transformation of the grey stone wash-house by the guttering candles, mysterious shadows, the magically foaming suds and swirling steam. The movements of the washers are ritualised into a strange dance:

> I used to pause in the open doorway, on my way out to the street, and watch the women at their work. It was like a scene from a play. The rising clouds of steam, the bare arms rhythmically rising and falling, the stately tread to the drying cupboards, and the measured walk back, bearing their washing gracefully before them. (17)

As well as being a practical illustration of Glasgow tenement life of the past and demonstrating the author's early feeling for theatrical spectacle, this incident is a good example of a child's ability to make "magic" out of the most ordinary and everyday events.

Winifred Foley uses washing day in her village in the Forest of Dean as an example of the stoical acceptance of everyday hardship that the villagers endured without undue complaint. She describes how the women had to carry the water from the well, but assures us that the washing was still done regularly every week. With her typical, sympathetic observation and use of colloquial speech she recalls:

> Clothes that today cannot be got rid of at a penny a bundle at the tail end of a jumble sale would have been thankfully washed and hung out with pride in those days.
>
> Washing wasn't out on the line long; if the weather was wet, it must somehow be dried round the fire. Few had more than one change of clothing. In long wet spells you might hear a woman call across the garden to her neighbour, 'I'll 'a to turn me britches and shimmy this wik for we can't get near our vire for tryin' to dry the pit clothes out'. (18)

Winifred Foley sees their stoicism as one of the strengths of her people and an inspiration, but to other autobiographers washing day was a symbol for the tragedy of their childhood, reflecting the oppression and poverty in which they and their parents lived. Kathleen Woodward was brought up in Bermondsey before the First World

War. Unlike Winifred Foley, her pity for those around her who lived in dreadful conditions is combined with rage at their animal stoicism - as she sees it - and resentment of those who bring about such conditions. Her ambivalent feelings towards her harsh mother are a similar mixture of resentment and compassion. Her mother took in washing to make up the family's pitiful income, spending long hours at the washtub in spite of a badly ulcerated leg:

> I thought of mother. In new ways I thought of my mother. The dreadful wounds in her leg. Stern, set face. Not a whimper from mother; but, dear Christ! do you see mother's leg?
>
> Mother said: "You give me the creeps, crying. What's the good of crying?"
>
> Mother at the washtub. The bad leg. Stand, stand, stand. "I want six pairs of feet and then I'd tire them all out." Mother standing on one leg, resting the bad leg on a box.
>
> I changed - inside. I came not to know my own self. My days were consumed in rage and anger against the order of things as I saw it reflected in Jipping Street, that factory, wherever I turned my eyes. Fiercely did I range myself with the forces of the oppressed. (19)

The staccato style of this passage reflects the author's almost incoherent panic and helplessness in the face of what she sees. The word order of the last sentence is reversed, giving a semi-poetic, Biblical ring to the words, and revealing a high degree of self-dramatization. She sees her young self already embattled against the status quo. Her mother's predicament has become a symbol for the wider suffering, her lack of "even a whimper" of protest at her pain and the unfairness of her life an example of the lack of protest among the poor people whose lot Kathleen Woodward pities, along with her own. The mother's refusal to accept her daughter's sympathy typifies the relationship between the two - the one longing for affection and understanding and the other with none to give and no desire to receive any. The sight of her mother's suffering was not the only factor which led the author to try to change things by becoming a suffragette and socialist, but an important one, and thus an important memory of childhood.

Catherine Cookson's mother also took in washing to make extra money:

> For days on end the kitchen would be hung with damp washing. Week in, week out, year in, year out, it was the same. Even

> to this day I hate the sight of lines full of washing.
>
> With such a life can you wonder that Kate was bad tempered; and I am merely relating the work she had to do. Interspersed with this was the tyranny of me granda towards her. And also give place to the unwanted affections of her half-brother, and the ever present knowledge that her life was "running out fast through a dark alleyway", as she said. (20)

Catherine's relationship with her mother was, like Kathleen Woodward's, a mixture of love and resentment, but here she is full of pity and anxious to understand – and encourage the reader to understand – and make allowances for her. The "allowances" are probably retrospective, so that the autobiography helps to make up for harsh judgements the child may have made about "Kate", with her evil temper and intemperate habits. The description of the drudgery of the washing is used as a way in to understanding, with the author's thoughts then proceeding to show the other factors which contributed to her unfortunate life and failings, as well as the child's own environment.

Another everyday factor of the child's life at home that is often mentioned in autobiography is sleep. Sleep, with its attendant memories of dreams, anxieties, comforts and discomforts, is one of our most sensitive and ritualistic activities, so it is not surprising that it is so often remembered. Memories vary from a comfort so secure and pleasurable that it is almost a return to the womb, to a recognition of real distress. As one might expect, the people around the child who are given prominence in the autobiography as a whole feature largely in memories of sleep and bedtime. Eleanor Farjeon remembers a particular "tucking up" ritual with her mother. (21) Molly Weir recalls the cosiness of sharing a bed with her beloved grandmother. (22) Christopher Milne has a memory which emphasises the closeness of his nanny. One night when he could not sleep because he was worried about something she was at his side in an instant when he called her. A few typically sensible words from her made everything all right! (23)

These three illustrations reflect the nostalgic tone of the autobiographies which contain them; the general tone, or even the themes, of the autobiography are often carried in memories of sleep. Gwen Raverat and Laurie Lee both use their memories of bedtime to

enhance their comedy. Gwen Raverat looks back and laughs at her child protagonist's tiger on the bed canopy. (24) Laurie Lee recalls his exclusion from his mother's bed at the age of three. When this happened it was probably genuinely distressing for the little boy, but the tone of his autobiography tends towards light-hearted exaggeration and his description of this incident is no exception. He describes it as "my first betrayal, my first dose of ageing hardness, my first lesson in the gentle, merciless rejection of women". (25) This comic exaggeration has the effect of diffusing any deep sympathy we might feel for the little boy, which is in line with Lee's aim of writing an autobiography which is never, at this stage, allowed to become too serious.

Less happy memories abound. A. L. Rowse tells of his night fears which, he says, were partly due to his family's practice of frightening him off to bed with threats of Wee Willie Winkie or the bogey-man. Typically, he uses this to illustrate his own superior knowledge, pointing out the stupidity of people who knew no better than to frighten a sensitive child in this way. He reinforces this when he goes on to tell how he himself, having learned from his own misery, helped a young relative to grow out of similar night fears. (26)

If Rowse looks back and sees himself plagued by fools, Helen Forrester sees her childhood self plagued by poverty. Her description of her sleeping arrangements underlines this. For years she slept on a "bed" consisting of an old door padded with newspapers, standing on piles of bricks. The only covering was an old overcoat. She felt she had progressed when some charitable well-wisher gave the family an old iron bedstead she could use. It had sagging springs and no mattress, so was no great improvement as far as comfort was concerned, but she tells us of its symbolic importance, saying that "it represented my first personal gain at home since we had arrived in Liverpool". (27) The incident illustrates her early life's privations, but it's major purpose is to emphasise the lack of recognition of her needs as an individual until then. This is what makes it a memorable occasion, worthy of inclusion in her autobiography.

Unfortunately there is insufficient space here to discuss the many other aspects of the child protagonist's life at home that are

found in autobiography, and there is a danger of straying into social history rather than analysing literature. Clothing is often mentioned as a source of deprivation or acute embarrassment; games and pastimes are often described, particularly if they are outmoded; visitors to the home come and go, offering a memorable break from routine or a special flavour to the child's life. The trivia of everyday life is recalled - old-fashioned sweets and toys, for example - and nostalgic pleasure or social significance, depending on the autobiographer's purpose, are sought. Coe details many of these in his chapter called "Inventories of a Small World, describing them as "the minutiae of everyday life". (28)

Education

Since the institution of compulsory education in 1870, school has filled a large part of children's lives. Like any other area of life recorded in autobiography, the humdrum parts are usually forgotten or deliberately omitted. Pranks and miseries are remembered and recorded as items of interest, and the child from a kind and gentle home often remembers school with a returning twinge of fear. Ernest Shepard went for a time to a horrible school called"Oliver's", where bullying was the norm. He says he does not remember learning anything there "beyond an apprenticeship in self-preservation". (29) Some years after his time there he met another former pupil, who asked him "Shepard, do you ever wake up in the morhing with a feeling that you have to go back to that place?" (30) Shepard adds, "I am sure it had a blighting effect on both our young lives". His remark about not learning anything is significant, for very often the whole process of formal education is remembered as boring and uninspiring, yet in spite of the tedium and horror of school life, many autobiographers have somehow found their way into the boundless possibilities of a wider intellectual or artistic world, no matter how limited their initial opportunities. It is common for one really good or inspiring teacher, amid a mass of cane-swishers and rote-learners, to be singled out as memorable and influential. Sometimes this is due to enlightened (for the day) teaching methods; at others a child's dormant talent or interest may be awakened by a particular work that is put before it. As the

autobiographer is, obviously, engaged in the craft of writing, it is to be expected that he will look back and search for the roots of his ability and interest in that area.

Leslie Thomas lived in the "macho" environment of a Barnardo Boys' Home, where any signs of aesthetic sensitivity would have been greeted with howls of derision by his fellows. The unfortunate woman teacher known as "Maggie" was the butt of many jokes, but unwittingly opened the door to "words" for Thomas when she asked him to read aloud from the Song of Solomon:

> One November day, with the rain washing the school's small windows, Maggie called me out and gave me the open Bible to recite. I read it as we had always read it, gabblingly fast, the quicker the better, and get it over with. But only so far like that . . . Suddenly I knew what words were; that put together they sang like a song. I stumbled, then started again. But more slowly . . . When I got to the piece about 'the rain is over and gone' they all howled because it was teeming outside. But I did not look up at them. The words of Solomon's song made me ache inside and I was afraid it might show. I gave the Bible back to Maggie and, although she did not know it, and never knew it, she had taught me her first and only lesson at Narborough. I knew about words, and I went on seeking them, discovering them, and wondering and delighting in their shape and beauty. For me Maggie had made a miracle.(31)

V. S. Pritchett writes enthusiastically of a new teacher who opened his eyes to the possibilities of literature:

> Many of Bartlett's methods are now commonplace in English schools; in 1911 they were revolutionary. For myself, the sugar-bag blue cover of the English Review was decisive. One had thought literature was in books written by dead people who had been oppressively over-educated. Here was writing by people who were alive and probably writing at this moment. (32)

Even in the heart of the Forest of Dean a Miss Hale made life richer for her pupils, including Winifred Foley:

> She took us out of the classroom, over the hills and far away, with Uncle Tom's Cabin, Black Beauty, Lorna Doone, Treasure Island. This wasn't just 'doing the classics' - as she went along, we followed spellbound. Every day, life became richer. Learning new words was like having a key to free the imprisoned thought I'd been unable to express. And Miss Hale was always ready to listen. (33)

Such gratitude and appreciation is repeated again and again, with the realisation that such enlightenment was a vital part of the autobiographer's aesthetic development. Yet a further connection

can often be made with other themes of the autobiography. A. L. Rowse and V. S. Pritchett found their desire for education changing their attitudes towards their families. Both resented the class into which they had been born, and which they felt held them back. Whilst Rowse can dismiss his father as a man of no importance who took no interest in his son's education, Pritchett's feelings are far more complex. The tragedy at the heart of his comedy is that his father, who wanted to give him everything, could not give him the understanding he most desired because he was trapped in his own prejudices and beliefs. Pritchett was overjoyed when he discovered the possibilities of further education that were open to him, saying, "I needn't go straight home from the office. I could go on to the Polytechnic in Regent Street". (34) Education has by this time become not only an end in itself, but a physical and symbolic escape from home. For Winifred Foley school is used as one of the collective experiences of village life, as well as a source of personal pleasure, in her autobiography. She does not claim that her delight on hearing readings from the classics was an individual experience unique to her, clasping it to herself as Thomas does, but is joined by all her classmates when she says "She took <u>us</u> out of the classroom and <u>we</u> followed spellbound". So often it seems to be the autobiographer alone who gets the message!

School is also part of the collective life experience in Robert Roberts' autobiography. In his chapter headed "SKOOL" he charts his own progress through that institution, but also makes a number of social comments on the way. We learn that the inspectors condemned the neighbourhood school year after year: "They damned the unqualified staff, the stinking rooms, the appalling cultural results. In all, they reported, a place of educational ill-repute". (35) He closes the chapter with the end of his own schooldays; unable to get a place at the Technical School, he gets a routine job in the brass-finishing shop. He expresses his bitterness and disappointment thus:

> I stood on the iron bridge, took our headmaster's reference from my pocket, tore it to shreds and pushed it through the latticework. The flurry scattered far below, on to a train of coal trucks pouring into the docks tunnel and vanished. 'Like a snowflake in the river, A moment white and gone forever.' That was school done! I was entering the world of men. (36)

The unspoken comment is, "This is what happens to boys like me -

intelligent, ambitious, in this social situation. Our childhood is over in no time at all. The only result of the education we are given is a useless bit of paper. Then we are turned out into the world to start the dreary grind of adult life". However, the personal element is as strong as the social message; to have his hopes thus dashed must have been painful for Roberts - he needs to re-live the time in order to come to terms with it and to elicit sympathy for his child protagonist. There may also be an element of justifiable self-congratulation that he managed to overcome such terrible deprivation and disappointment to become a social reformer and author.

Locality

All children absorb the flavour of their own neighbourhood as they grow up, though their memories of it will be conditioned by the experiences which it represents to them personally. One child's happy place may have been another's nightmare. The nicely brought-up little girl, passing through the local slums briefly on her way to dancing class,may have been fearful of them, imagining unknown horrors; to the child who lived in them they may have been full of life and colour. Autobiographers who had a working-class childhood usually feel strongly about the locality of their youth. In town or country, the working-class home was usually small and over-crowded, so that life overflowed into the streets. Gardens were small or non-existent, or in the country were often used to grow essential foodstuffs rather than as play areas. Facilities were often shared - wash-houses, taps, lavatories. Often "having a bath" meant a walk to the public baths, if it could be afforded. No working-class child could fail to remember the neighbourhood in which he was brought up when it was almost as much part of his life as his own home. The middle-class child, on the other hand, more often regarded the neighbourhood as the place through which it was taken by nanny or parents to some other house for visits, or to school or for treats. Ernest Shepard was allowed to ride his toy horse up and down the pavement outside, but was otherwise accompanied by Martha, the nurse-maid. (37) Richard Cobb was allowed freedom to wander in Tunbridge Wells, but remarks that his parents must have been "singularly

trusting" (38), indicating that this was not the norm.

Whilst the memories of the middle years of childhood will be rather more certain than those of the earliest years, they will still be subjective and liable to involuntary distortion. Places are not always as the autobiographer thinks he remembers them. Richard Cobb, on returning there, found he had remembered Tunbridge Wells the wrong way up. (39) This does not matter; the autobiographer is not writing a guide book, but telling us, as best he can, how his place seemed to him and what part it played in his childhood. This part is often more complex than a mere description of "where I lived". What begins as remembered background description often tends, as the autobiography reveals more of the protagonist's character, to show feelings that are stronger than affectionate nostalgia. Both Richard Cobb and Christopher Milne admit that at certain periods of their lives their special place was a substitute for human companionship. When Christopher Milne was almost ten years old two momentous traumas occurred in his life: his nanny left to get married and he was sent away to school. He became shy and developed a speech impediment, choosing to slip off into the nearby countryside in the school holidays rather than have to mix with visitors. He describes this as "bliss" - "Alone with myself. Alone - yet never lonely". (40)

When he was away at school, Richard Cobb longed for Tunbridge Wells as a place where he too could be alone. He recalls the town as:

> . . . largely immune from class conflict and social tensions, and so one in which a rather frightened child could feel immensely secure. And this sense of security would be derived as much from <u>place</u> as from <u>people</u> . . . but also a place of wonder and constant discovery. (41)

He does not attribute his solitary habits to any particular trauma, but says he was ". . .happy in his own company and with that, so rich and varied, of the topography of Tunbridge Wells and its neighbourhood." (42) Every part of the town had its special associations, fitting in with his different moods and activities, so that the map of his childhood is superimposed on the remembered map of the locality. There were places where he went to feel melancholy, others to gain excitement by exploration, and a lush,

over-grown and unhealthy dell where he indulged in some kind of early sexual fantasies. Without Tunbridge Wells, Cobb's autobiography could not exist, for it is as much a portrait of the town (albeit an internalised one, and slightly askew!) as it is of his youthful self. At times one feels that he may be using the town's interests and topography as a smoke-screen behind which he conceals his own feelings, for the view we have of him is always rather oblique. He is more concerned with people and places that filled his youth than with dramatic personal revelations or insight. He tells us that Tunbridge Wells was a good place for "a rather frightened child", but does not tell us <u>why</u> that child was frightened.

Many autobiographers see the place of their childhood as a glorious playground, a Garden of Eden, no matter how poverty-stricken it may have been. This is especially so when the place was an isolated country community. Winifred Foley and her brothers and sisters could roam freely and find simple pleasures in the enclosed world of the Forest of Dean, Mollie Harris in rural Oxfordshire, Laurie Lee in Gloucestershire. In the towns a serpent tended to appear in the Garden sooner or later. With closer proximity to other worlds the poorer child soon became aware that it was being looked at askance, or began to be critical of its immediate surroundings. Feelings could then become ambivalent, torn between loyalty and an increasingly critical attitude. Whilst Dolly Scannell would never admit any disloyalty to the London East End district of Poplar in which she was brought up, she was sometimes puzzled and bewildered by the reaction of outsiders. She remembers one regular event which was particularly hurtful, and probably makes her as angry now as it did when she was a child:

> . . . I remember how I hated the "charabangs" which drove round the East End in the summer months loaded with tourists and a guide gazing with fright at the slums. My father used to say, "They don't know how the other half lives," and I would have liked to put my thumb to my nose at them. (43)

The inclusion of this memory and the feeling it invoked <u>is</u> a way of thumbing her nose at the insensitive tourists, rather delayed, but no doubt quite satisfying.

Robert Roberts and his father once went to tea with some rather rich relations. The squalor of his own neighbourhood in the slums of Salford became apparent to him when he noticed a

neighbour, Mrs. Kenny, sitting outside her house:

> Pressed to her side stood one Master Ernest Kenny, aged two, erect in his little clogs. Eyeballs tilted, he was taking suck after the manner born from a breast bare and big as a bladder of lard, the while his mother scanned the Evening Chronicle. We turned down a ginnel and crossed to the shop. With us 'titty' on the threshold was a common enough feast, but on that evening never had it, and the whole district, seemed to me so deplorably low! (44)

Even as an adult, Dolly Scannell is still the loyal insider, indignant at being regarded as part of fearful spectacle; Roberts as a boy appears to have already become the outsider, seeing his neighbourhood critically, deploring not only its conditions but also the behaviour of some of its people. This may indicate the embryo social historian, but also reflects his dislike of his father who, he insists, brought the family (and especially his beloved mother) to this squalor. It is only one of the incidents that reflects a major theme of his autobiography - his antipathy towards his father - whilst having the surface appearance of social comment.

The geography of the streets of Liverpool was as much part of Helen Forrester's childhood as that of Tunbridge Wells was of Richard Cobb's, but she remembers the landmarks of the city as places where she often felt humiliated or ashamed as she trundled her baby brother around in a broken-down perambulator. Unlike Mollie Harris or Winifred Foley, who were probably equally ragged, she was not part of a supportive community but an outsider whose Garden of Eden had been left behind on the other side of the Mersey. Whatever community life there existed in the slums of Liverpool, the Forresters had no part in it according to Helen. Her first view of Liverpool was of "a city which seemed to be slowly dying, unloved and unsung, in the Depression of the nineteen-thirties". (45) This description parallels her own state when she is suicidal from years of near-starvation, lack of care, lack of affection and lack of intellectual fulfilment, so that the city is a symbol reflecting herself in the autobiography.

When it is found that many autobiographers had similar childhood experiences it is tempting to conclude that these experiences in themselves - especially the more painful ones - are a cause of autobiography. This is dangerous ground, for we do not know how

many other children had similar experiences and did not write autobiography. The examples selected here, though typical of many more autobiographies of childhood, are not numerous enough anyway to draw any such conclusions; they are merely intended to give some indication of the things that autobiographers find memorable from their childhood and how they are incorporated into their individual histories. Richard Coe examined about six hundred autobiographies of childhood and thought it safe to draw conclusions about the basic nature of their authors. For example, he noted that a large number of them had a father who was absent, inadequate or dead; this led him to conclude that this in itself was "a contributory motivation for the writing of the remininiscences". (46) Whilst trauma of any kind has been shown to be a likely motivation for writing autobiography, it would be unwise to conclude that because a child is fatherless it will be more likely to write an autobiography as an adult than one who has both parents living. In a century which has seen two major world wars the loss of a father was not uncommon; again, many fatherless children did not write autobiographies. Autobiographers have, above all, an urge to write a good and interesting story about themselves; fatherless children - or better still, orphans - have always been popular in literature, so the trauma of being deprived of a parent can readily be turned to good account. Perhaps the best conclusion that can be drawn is that similar traumas probably exist in all sections of the population but autobiographers are fortunate in being able to express themselves in an attempt to come to terms with theirs.

CHAPTER SIX

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL USE OF SOME COMMON EXPERIENCES OF CHILDHOOD

Parents

1 Richard Coe, When the Grass was Taller, p.139
2 Kathleen Dayus, Her People, p.25
3 Ibid, p.184
4 Kathleen Woodward, Jipping Street, p.18
5 Ibid, p.18
6 Ibid, p.18
7 Dolly Scannell, Mother Knew Best, p.75, discussed in Chapter 4, p.54, of this work
8 Christopher Milne, The Enchanted Places, p.179
9 Robert Roberts, A Ragged Schooling, p.125
10 V. S. Pritchett, A Cab at the Door, p.189
11 A. L. Rowse, A Cornish Childhood, p.192
12 Ibid, pp.203-204

Home Life

13 Richard Cobb, Still Life, p.96
14 Maud Pember Reeves, Round About a Pound a Week, e.g. pp.33, 55, 61
15 Pritchett, op.cit., pp.28-29
16 Ibid, p.29
17 Molly Weir, Shoes Were for Sunday, p.118
18 Winifred Foley, A Child in the Forest, p.17
19 Woodward, op.cit., p.100
20 Catherine Cookson, Our Kate, p.85
21 Eleanor Farjeon, A Nursery in the Nineties, p.238
22 Weir, op.cit., p.9
23 Milne, op.cit., p.46
24 Gwen Raverat, Period Piece, p.162, discussed in Chapter 4, p.58 of this work
25 Laurie Lee, Cider with Rosie, p.28
26 Rowse, op,cit., pp.89-92
27 Helen Forrester, Liverpool Miss, p.69
28 Coe, op.cit., p.218ff.

Education

29 Ernest Shepard, Drawn from Life, p.23
30 Ibid, p.33
31 Leslie Thomas, This Time Next Week, pp.88-89
32 Pritchett, op.cit., p.90
33 Foley, op.cit., p.50
34 Pritchett, op.cit., p.186
35 Roberts, op.cit., p.141
36 Ibid, p.158

Locality

37 Ernest Shepard, Drawn from Memory, p.14
38 Cobb, op.cit., p.27
39 Ibid, Preface p.x

40 Milne, op.cit., p.164
41 Cobb, op.cit., Preface, p.xiii
42 Ibid, p.61
43 Scannell, op.cit., p.134
44 Roberts, op.cit., p.125
45 Helen Forrester, Twopence to Cross the Mersey, p.9
46 Coe, op.cit., p.144

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE END OF CHILDHOOD IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The psychological needs of the autobiographer in reconstructing his childhood have been mentioned at various points in this work and shown to be of prime importance in the conscious and unconscious selection of material. It remains to examine the ways in which autobiographers choose to end the stories of their childhood and to ask how these endings relate to the work as a whole and its adult author's needs.

The beginning and end of life are certainties with fixed dates but, just as the beginning of remembered experience is vague, so is the end of the period regarded as childhood. To some extent it is marked by various social customs - tribal initiation, Barmitzvah, leaving school, early betrothal or marriage, starting work, going away to college, leaving home, and so on. These, however, are imposed markers; the child will have internalised them gradually, absorbing them from the experiences and expectations of those around it, accepting them as landmarks on the way to adult life. But there are other, deeper, emotional factors involved in the process of coming to terms with the end of childhood. Emotional dependence may continue long after financial independence has been achieved; the yearning for the places and people of childhood may linger despite physical separation from them. Autobiographers have many ways of identifying the end of childhood, but all have the same difficulties. They have the inevitable difficulty of seeing the phase though adult eyes whilst trying to understand how the child saw it, and then that of using it as a satisfying conclusion to the story of their early lives.

The point at which an autobiographer chooses to end the volume devoted to childhood, or part of it, usually has little to do with the social markers mentioned above and a great deal to do with the emotional and psychological state of both adult autobiographer and child protagonist. Occasionally an autobiographer will tell of the feelings of childhood being protracted to an extreme degree. Eleanor Farjeon admits clinging to the family's fantasy game of "becoming" someone else rather than facing up to new experience well

into middle life, seeing herself as emotionally crippled until then. (1) At the end of A Nursery in the Nineties she says that the feeling of being one of the nursery four persisted even when her brothers began to die in old age. (2) It is as though she never, in fact, saw a definite ending to her childhood. The book rambles on, but she seems unable to end it until all the other protagonists are dead and their story finished.

The death of one of the main "characters" is often used by autobiographers as a fitting close to a volume of autobiography dealing mainly with early life. This is most common when the death has left a huge gap in the child's life. Patricia Beer concludes Mrs. Beer's House with the death of her mother and the subsequent departure of the sisters and their father for Torquay - the reverse journey to that undertaken by their mother when she so sadly left Torquay at the beginning of the book to teach in Exmouth. Mrs. Beer's house is, literally, closed for ever, and although Patricia is only fourteen and rather immature there is no more to say about childhood when the strong-minded pivot of the family is gone. As an adult Patricia can see her mother's faults - the bigotry, the unreasonable assertion of her will and opinions on her family - and write about them with a mixture of deep affection, humour and irony. Yet she can also see that her mother's very certainty of being right about everything made for a safe, happy and secure childhood for her daughters. After her death the "weak" father (as Patricia sees him) came to rely on them "for company, for emotional satisfaction and for moral support" (3) which they were ill-equipped to give. Paradoxically, she says that in their own eyes and in everybody else's the two girls suddenly became younger, in need of protection and coddling against the stark facts of their mother's death. They were not allowed to see her when she was dying or to go to her funeral for fear that it would be "too upsetting". At the time this seemed to be accepted without question, but the adult Patricia complains:

> We should have seen her in her coffin, if only because she had thought it right for us to see a great many people dead in theirs. She should not have been deprived in all these ways, and neither should we. She was robbed of her due, and we were forced into a helplessness and inexperience that made it impossible for real grief to begin. (4)

The happy years of childhood are an enclosed world in the book, standing out in sharp contrast against the final hints of insecurity to come. The chapter in Patricia's life which is centred on her mother and her plans for her daughters has come full circle with the departure from Exmouth. The form of the autobiography, ending as it does with her death, acts as a memorial to a woman who would now be forgotten except in the minds of a few surviving relatives. It gives "Mother" her due, and is an outlet for the public mourning and private grief which the author was not allowed to express. The childhood can now achieve a retrospective completeness.

Ernest Shepard also creates a time capsule of his first seven years in Drawn From Memory, which is confined to the time before his mother died. He concludes the book with the memory of a happy trip to the pantomime and afterwards lying sleepily in bed listening to his mother singing downstairs. (5) At the beginning of the book he has told us that it was soon after the events chronicled that his mother became ill and died. Life could never be quite the same for the little boy. He says, "It was years before the cloud seemed to lift and the natural buoyancy and happiness of youth revived itself in me". (6) From Chapter One to the end of the book the carefree happiness of these early years is preserved, untarnished by what we already know from the Preface - that they will soon end with his mother's death. The elderly autobiographer induces the reader to collude in leaving the little boy in his unsuspecting innocence, listening contentedly to his mother's song. Later events belong to a different, less light-hearted phase of childhood and need a volume to themselves. (7) Like Patricia Beer's, his use of form creates an enclosed world, but here a never ending circle of happy and magical childhood is created. When the end of the book is reached, the reader will remember that the later events are mentioned at the beginning. He will then turn back to the beginning to remind himself what happened next - but then he will soon be in the autobiographer's happy childhood world again - or so the author hopes.

The death of her grandmother was traumatic for Molly Weir and the commemorative function of Shoes Were for Sunday has already been

noted. (8) The book begins with the memory of the comfort of sleeping with Grannie and ends with the misery and desolation that the author felt after her death. This gives the period of "life with Grannie" a special importance. At the end of the autobiography she ameliorates her pain by recalling her attempts to use the sad experience in a positive way. Sent to stay with an aunt to spare her the further trauma of the funeral, Molly is given breakfast in bed - an unheard of luxury. Remembering how Grannie used to assert that "bairns have to learn to stand up to life and work hard, for we never ken whit's in front o' them", and fearing that if she continued to have breakfast in bed she "wouldn't be able to face up to life" and would go "soft", Molly resolves to get up next morning. (9) The use of this memory in her autobiography reinforces the therapy that began at the time. It also gives a satisfactory hint of recovery, that Molly will "come through", and shows that Grannie lives on in her as a continuing influence and strength. It also refers us to the theme of the autobiography which was hinted at in the beginning with her father's gritty comments that she can well walk and does not need to be carried - the theme of standing on her own feet, making her way in life. This literary device combines with the drama of Grannie's death and Molly's brave attempt to come to terms with it to form a naturalistic and appropriate ending to this part of the autobiography.

The end of a particular phase of childhood is easy to identify and use when there has been the trauma of bereavement; it was sharply felt at the time and is painfully remembered. When the childhood has not been marked by any such abrupt transition its ending, for the purposes of autobiography, may be more difficult to define. Neverthless the autobiographer can usually trace the gradual processes of personal and social change which led to what he now regards as an end to childhood and which satisfies his need for retrospective completeness.

Where the childhood is portrayed as a Garden of Eden the loss of the joys of the garden through the loss of its magic, or a deliberate expulsion from it, will form a fitting ending. At the end of <u>Cider with Rosie</u> Laurie Lee tells us that the old life has changed; the squire is dead, the village has shrunk, his sisters are

getting married. He himself is looking outwards, towards a larger world. At the time of their occurrence the changes came gradually and some may have had little significance for a young boy, but Lee looks back and sees the general restlessness reflected in his own life at that time. At the end of the book he is not grown up, for he is still at school, still dependent on his parents, but the time of change and discontent marks for him the retrospective departure from the innocent happiness of his childhood, forming an appropriate ending for the volume of his autobiography which is devoted to that time.

The inroads of civilisation eventually intruded upon the magic of Mollie Harris's childhood idyll. At fourteen she left school and started work; boys started to call; fields which had been playgrounds now became courting places; a gramophone was bought; the "talkies" came to the cinema; the family moved out of the village into a larger house. This latter departure marked the final emotional break with the magic of childhood; there was no longer the closeness of the cottage and this co-incided with the natural loneliness of adolescence, making Mollie sad and restless. Looking back she recognises this, saying:

> . . . the magic of my youth was gradually fading away. The funny, familiar things that had happened during those green years were already half-forgotten memories. I was trying desperately to hang on to a world that would never come back again, but it was months before I realised this. (10)

As an adult autobiographer she can write about events and bring them into focus, recognising cause and result, tracing the steps which led rather uncomfortably from happy childhood to adolescence and the leaving behind of magic. She knows now that the acceptance of this loss was an essential part of the inevitable process of growing up, and that here the autobiography, like her childhood, must end. She has, however, the retrospective satisfaction of knowing that the unhappy phase would not last for ever, and of being able to recreate the magic which she thought was lost.

V. S. Pritchett chooses to end the autobiography of his early years when his protagonist is twenty years old and seeking to escape from the disadvantages of his environment - and his father. The last few pages of A Cab at the Door are a final attempt to understand

him, written with the mature consideration of later years, but the overwhelming feeling of the young Pritchett as he waits for the boat train to Paris is that he is at last setting himself free. His father expects him back in about a month and thinks he is still in control of his son, but Pritchett confesses, "I could not tell him or my mother that once I had gone I would never come back". (11) By this time he has been at work for a few years, earning his own living and following his own interests, but the real ending of dependence and parental control comes at this point, when he can put the physical distance of the Channel between him and his family. Throughout the autobiography the "cab at the door" has been the symbol of getting away, moving on, but now, at its end there is the protagonist's own running away to round off the theme. Once again a literary device has been used to naturalise the arbitrary ending.

Attempts to encapsulate a happy state of childhood have been noted; whatever happens in later life, or even later childhood, that bright area has been recreated and captured by the autobiographer and made safe. Considering the joy with which so many autobiographers recall their happy memories of childhood one cannot doubt that this results in deep satisfaction. Other autobiographers, whose memories may not be entirely happy or, like V. S. Pritchett ultimately feel the need to escape from their background or family, still seem to need to find or impose harmony in one way or another by constructing an appropriate ending to childhood in autobiography. A. L. Rowse's stated intention was to describe the progress of a working-class boy through the educational system. By the end of A Cornish Childhood he has done this and is about to go to Oxford. Like Pritchett, he has escaped from the irksomeness of his background. A combination of sadness and irritation at his family's lack of interest in his achievements has permeated the book, so there remains the need to set himself to rights with this rather disappointing childhood (or to try to make things "all right" for his protagonist) as best he can. This he does in a retrospective fit of nostalgia at the break-up of the old community of the village, remembering in particular the family's removal from the house where he was brought up. The irritations of family and village life seem temporarily forgotten

as he remembers how the donkey and cart took the household goods to the new home and associations come flooding back. There was the rosewood table at which he had spent hours writing up his diary and essays; the piano which his sister had played as he fell asleep. (12) He cannot pretend that there was any great closeness between his protagonist and other people, so he transfers his feelings to the homely objects which had warm memories for him. It is his way of anchoring his childhood for his personal satisfaction, with the removal acting as a suitable symbol for his own departure from the village and rounding off the autobiography.

Philip Oakes' childhood is in some disarray at the end of From Middle England. On the final page his older woman friend tells him that he has made her pregnant - he is only about sixteen years old and feels in need of comfort and support himself at that moment. (13) At the same time he is escaping from the control of his mother and her family with an uncomfortable mixture of guilt and relief. He has complained throughout the autobiography that his opinion is never asked about anything that is to happen to him, so at last he has the satisfaction of beginning to take charge of his own life, away from the oppressive family. They have long ago labelled him as the black sheep, steering his mother from behind with their strong moral assertiveness. Even though they will never know about his forthcoming fatherhood, it seems likely that once he has recovered from the shock of the news Philip will feel a certain perverse satisfaction at having proved himself "a man" in the most basic sense, and at having given the moral code a smack in the eye at the same time! At the beginning he is sent away to school against his will. He goes on to relate what he regards as a series of "betrayals" by his mother and her family, proceeding steadily towards rejection of much that they stand for. His voluntary departure at the end of the autobiography to find his own adult life affirms his independence and departure from childhood and forms an appropriate and logical conclusion.

The choice and arrangement of the content of autobiography has been shown to be highly selective throughout, controlled by conscious and unconscious factors. There is the universal need to

make sense of life by creating a coherent story from its remembered fragments and, in the case of published autobiography, the need to create a narrative which both author and publisher hope will be a commercial success. The eventual reader will have chosen to read the autobiography because he is, presumably, interested in the childhood of others and the ways in which it relates to his own or reflects his social concerns. Having identified with the protagonist and sympathised with, or studied, his plight, he needs to feel in some way satisfied when he has finished reading the book. This satisfaction will come partly from the skill and artistry of the autobiographer's arrangement of his material, but ultimately from his choice of ending, which should give the work a sense of completion even though the life it describes has hardly begun. It is clear that the chosen ending of the autobiography of childhood is not random or constructed primarily to meet the demands of the narrative for a conventional rounding-off. It does not come about because the author's memory has suddenly faltered or because he can find nothing more of interest to say; nor is it a predictable point indicated by social custom or the age of the protagonist. It frequently offers a tidy finishing-off, naturalistic though probably contrived, akin to that often found in its sister genre, the novel. Novels are no longer required to have "happy endings", and many autobiographies of childhood conclude with a twinge of sadness. Yet in their different ways these endings suggest that the autobiographer has sought for, and found, an ultimate harmony - for he too needs to feel satisfied when he has finished writing the autobiography.

There is harmony of <u>form</u> when the end of the autobiography comfortably rounds off its themes. Various literary devices will have been used to this end; the chosen "story" line will have been worked out; the reader will have a good idea of the fate of most of the "characters"; symbols may have been used to good effect for the last time, reinforcing their earlier meanings. There is also harmony of <u>spirit</u> - the satisfaction the autobiographer feels at the emotional rounding-off of his experiences. Like any other part of an autobiography of childhood, its ending is related to the child's universal experiences, but is ultimately an <u>individual</u>

matter concerned with the careful balance of the demands of the narrative and the autobiographer's current psychological needs. His return to the pleasures and pains of childhood has been prompted by his conscious and unconscious need for therapy, confession, indulgence in nostalgia or the desire to inform or explain in various combinations. He has sought for a pattern of meaning in his early life and tried to assess the importance and significance of the points of change, departure, disappointment, trauma, release and fulfilment in that period, leading his protagonist along what Gusdorf describes as the path "from me to myself" (14) for a short way and coming to its end. Yet although it has ended, the path is not a blind alley that leads nowhere, but an important route leading to what the autobiographer now sees as an important crossroads in his life. The protagonist will have changed and grown on the way; as he looks forward his creator looks back, but both will see a signpost which indicates the path to another stage of life. Autobiographer and protagonist have met and recognised their common past and joint destiny; this will be the point at which it is psychologically and aesthetically right for the autobiography of childhood to end.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE END OF CHILDHOOD IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

1 Eleanor Farjeon, A Nursery in the Nineties, p.322
2 Ibid, p.530
3 Patricia Beer, Mrs. Beer's House, p.238
4 Ibid, p.237
5 Ernest Shepard, Drawn from Memory, p.175
6 Ibid, p.9
7 Ernest Shepard, Drawn from Life
8 Molly Weir, Shoes were for Sunday, discussed in this work pp.22-23
9 Ibid, p.154
10 Mollie Harris, A Kind of Magic, p.221
11 V. S. Pritchett, A Cab at the Door, p.205
12 A. L. Rowse, A Cornish Childhood, p.277
13 Philip Oakes, From Middle England, p.411
14 Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" in Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical, ed. James Olney, p.38

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